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THE KING-PIN SPORT; Or, The Missing Miner's Double Claimants.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.



"STEADY, YOU BRUTE!" CAME FROM THE LIPS OF THE RIDER.

The King-Pin Sport;

OR,

The Missing Miner's Double Claimants.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR

CHAPTER I.

HUNTED LIKE A MAD WOLF.

"STEADY, you brute!"

A half-groan, half-curse broke from the fever-parched lips of the rider as his mount stumbled and pitched forward, muzzle brushing the ground before he recovered, stung by spurs and lifted by rein.

It was a wild and difficult trail, where even a sure-footed mule might well have been excused for an occasional stumble, and the greatest marvel was that this poor, jaded, starvation-stunted broncho was able to show any speed at all.

Up, and on again, spurs digging nervously into the blood-wet flanks, and doubled reins lashing harshly from side to side over the animal's wrenched withers, its rider thinking only of distancing the death which he now knew was hot upon his trail.

"Oh, you brute! The bend—if I can only make the turn before he can—oh! don't shoot—don't—have mercy!"

While urging his jaded mount on, the hunted man kept glancing about, like one anticipating some dread vision; and now, with a hoarse, hardly articulate cry he recognized the living death from which he was fleeing in such hot haste.

Crack—crack!

Two shots that almost blended into one, rung forth upon the mountain air, and the doomed fugitive felt the wind of a bullet as it hissed past his ear; but ducking low along the broncho's withers, spurring and lashing, he fled in breakneck haste, trying to round the abrupt curve now visible ahead, and so place another barrier of ragged rocks between himself and this pitiless pursuer.

Sping—spang—slap!

A trained hand was working the lever of that Winchester repeater, and the deadly missiles were humming wickedly around those fleeing figures, but a charm seemed to ward off all injury, until—

Just as they gained the point where the trail began to curve to the left, one of those viciously-aimed bullets gave a different sound, and even before the broncho made its spasmodic bound, the hunted man knew his beast was hard hit, even if it had not received a death-wound.

Faltering, swaying dizzily for an instant after making that spasmodic leap, the broncho rallied under spur and reins, snorting wildly as he plunged onward once more with pellets of grooved lead whistling sharply around them.

Another jump—an almost human sound of bitter pain—then the death-stricken creature raced blindly onward, the broken bit tearing out of its mouth as the rider vainly strove to steady his mount.

A cry of fierce despair broke from the blanched lips of the hunted fugitive, and one hand mechanically fumbled at the belt where hung a loaded revolver, his fear-enlarged eyes roving backward to catch a first glimpse of the being who had so surely doomed him to death there in the lonely wilds.

The towering rocks shut off that view, but—for how long?

"Devil—devil from Hades!" hoarsely panted the fugitive, brushing a hand across his eyes, now suddenly grown dim and misty. "Give me a show—half a show, even!"

The wounded broncho flung up its head with a choking snort—the race was run!

The useless reins dropped from his hand, even as he kicked the heavy wooden stirrups from his feet; but, before he could do more—before he could make up his mind to fling himself out of the saddle to take his chances of broken bones on that rocky trail—the dying mustang plunged forward upon its knees, rolling over and over, then falling from the narrow trail to have the last spark of life dashed upon the pitiless rocks lying far below that level.

Crying out sharply, the fugitive tried to

save himself, but only partially succeeded; his fingers closed with a death-grip on the edge of the trail, his body sinking below that narrow level, his own weight breaking that insecure hold, and a wild, piercing scream of deathly fear coming back as the doomed one fell.

Not far enough to cause death, though that would have followed, only for the stunted bush which found root at the very edge of the little bench of rock; that alone kept the half-stunned wretch from falling over to meet the same fate which had already overtaken his horse—death and shattered bones on those pitiless rocks, hundreds of feet below the ledge on which he was now lying.

Far enough to benumb his body and briefly paralyze his limbs. Far enough to leave him but a vague, nightmare-like remembrance of that merciless foeman who had sworn his life away.

Then—

The cold rock against which his cheek was pressing seemed to turn suddenly to fire, out of which myriads of biting, spitting, stinging scorpions shot, blinding his eyes, tearing his skin, plucking the hairs from his lip and chin, sending thrills of agony from crown to sole.

Then—

From above came a second report, and the bullet, striking the stone at a little different angle, glanced off into space, giving a diabolical screech as its battered shape tore through the air.

The hunted man caught a dim, indistinct glimpse of a human face showing over the blood-marked trail, and knowing now what peril menaced, hastily shrunk as closely as possible to the face of the rock, gasping in partial relief as he saw that he was, for the moment at least, hidden from that merciless foeman.

A third shot smote the rock just as he made that hasty shift, and a few bits of shattered lead stung the hunted fugitive; but he heeded them not in his renewed fear for his life, nor paid he any attention to the blood which was rapidly masking his face, caused by the splinters of stone and bits of lead from that first shot.

Silence, grim and unbroken, above.

What was his enemy doing? Was he stealing nearer? Was he lowering himself from the trail, to make sure of the life he had sworn to take?

Shivering in every limb, pale as though already a corpse, the hunted man gripped his sole weapon, a heavy revolver, straining his ears, turning his eyes upward and flashing them from side to side in a vain attempt to discover what that pitiless foeman was now doing.

Then—spang!

The deftly-aimed bullet struck a raised point of rock near the edge of that shelf, glancing inward to sting that cowering shape with a flesh-wound, taking him so completely by surprise that he scrambled to one side, losing his balance, rolling over once, to fall over the edge of the ledge!

Another wild screech from those tortured lips, then—silence!

Again that life was saved, almost as by a miracle, and once again that hunter of man peered far over the escarpment, to catch a slight glimpse of his enemy, lying on another ledge, nearly a score feet further down the broken, irregular face of that precipice.

Only a heel, and a few inches of the leg to which that foot belonged; but, quickly, those double sights came into line, and once more the Winchester awoke the echoes of those wild mountains.

Barely touched by the lead, saved a crippled foot by the lack of skill on the part of his relentless pursuer, the fugitive jerked that member out of sight, groaning with pain and fear as he lay shivering there upon a sloping bit of rock: just enough room for his form to rest upon, yet all that saved him from a horrible death on those cruel rocks below.

Shot followed shot from above, the bullets marking the rock with bluish streaks here and there, as, with cool devilishness, the hunter of this now unarmed creature—whose sole weapon had fallen from his unnerved grip as that second fall took place—tried to glance his lead back toward the now hidden shape.

There was only one point from whence such a feat might be possible, and after a half-score of shots had failed to effect his diabolical wishes, those repeated shocks caused the frost-eaten rock to scale off, the thin mass going rattling and clattering down the face of the precipice, finding rest at last in the depths of that dark, pine-shaded gulch.

Once again—silence that seemed death-like!

Haunted by fears which had grown superstitious, the hunted man at last could endure the terrible suspense no longer, and though he shivered like a leaf with dread lest he be thus inviting his own death, he little by little stretched forth his head and neck, eyes turned upward toward the trail from whence those shots had been sped.

There was nothing to be seen in that quarter, but a few seconds later he caught a passing glimpse of his foeman, moving away, yet hardly acting like one who had so soon given over the death-hunt.

Where was he going? What did that movement mean, when—

"The fiend! The pitiless demon!"

The man-hunter, with Winchester slung by its strap over his shoulders, was risking his own bones if not his own life, in order to gain a projecting point of rock, from whence he would almost surely be able to command the narrow shelf of rock upon which his prey was then cowering!

Once there, he could aim and fire at his leisure!

With a shiver of terror, the doomed fugitive glanced downward to where the pine-shaded gulch wound its length along, thinking how nearly like heaven 'twould be were he only there, able to flee at will, instead of cowering here, forced to await the inevitable death which yonder fiend in human guise had decreed.

Was there no method of escape? Were there no means of foiling that pitiless demon? Why must he suffer death, simply because his heart had been opened to sympathy with and pity for a fellow-being?

With this wordless cry of despair, the sentenced fugitive averted his gaze from yonder pitiless foeman, groaning as he shuddered at his utter helplessness; but even as he did so, a faint gleam of hope sprung into existence.

Surely that narrow ledge widened ahead? Surely it made a curve around yonder rock instead of blending with the wall itself? If so—was all lost, even yet?

Trembling more than ever, now hope seemed to be dawning, the fugitive crept along that precarious perch, reaching the point where he had taken it for granted that the shelf ran out, to give a gasp of relief as he saw the narrow way broaden and grow wider as it sloped downward!

He looked back, to catch a final glimpse of that inexorable enemy, who was still toiling toward the pinnacle of rock from the apex of which he calculated he would wholly command the refuge of his prey.

Just the one glance; then the hunted man crept on, and on, more than once finding places where there were only scant inches of space to spare, but with each passing minute regaining something of the nerve and will-power which he had lost since finding yonder demon on his track.

Then the shelf gradually wasted away, and his further progress seemed barred unless—dared he take that perilous drop?

His brain grew dizzy as he looked over the edge of the rock, for that shelf below seemed perilously narrow and dangerously sloping!

Yet—dared he hesitate?

True, the point of rock toward which he had last seen his merciless enemy toiling on murder bent, was no longer visible, but how long would it be ere yonder demon again struck his trail?

With a mute prayer for protection, the hunted man gathered his courage, and dropped over the edge, striking the shelf below, saving himself from falling further by desperate clutching at the weather-worn rocks!

A brief space for rallying from the mental shock, then, with swift-beating heart and reviving hopes, he crept along that narrow trail, soon reaching a way which took him to the bottom of the tree shaded gulch,

where he felt that once more he stood a fair chance for cheating yonder human sleuth-hound of his coveted prey!

Not a sound came from his enemy, but the hunted man did not linger to see what would be the next move made by that merciless foeman; he thought only of reaching safety, where he might find other men to both listen and to shield the right.

The way was rough, and his immediate goal was yet distant; but the thought that he had at last thrown that demon off the scent lent him courage and strength, and though it cost him both time and toil to finally win a way out of that winding gulch, whose general course lengthened rather than shortened his journey, the fugitive counted it labor well spent, since through its agency he had so completely baffled his enemy.

"Still, the intense emotions through which he had been forced to pass of late had robbed the fugitive of much of his vital powers, and as his destination came nearer, his steps grew slower and his feet heavier, though he still doggedly pressed onward, muttering now and then to himself, like one repeating a message, or one recording an emphatic vow.

Ahead lay his goal, with the lights of early night already twinkling brightly under the moon, now almost at its full: Leadville, "Magic City" of the Colorado silver-fields!

Neither sight nor sound of his deadly enemy, and with safety so nigh to hand!

Spurred into fresh energy by this thought and yonder panorama, the nameless fugitive pressed onward, heading for the city which had, so to speak, sprung up in a night, but which resembled the mushroom in that respect alone.

He left the high ground, winning clear of stunted pines and other shrubbery, leaving the worst of the rocks and crags behind him, then entering the skirts of that marvelous mining-camp, beginning to breathe freely now that he found himself in easy reach of honest mankind once more.

From a brightly illuminated building came sounds of excitement, human voices lifted high as though in quarrel, and he mechanically paused to hear more, at the same time glancing around to— Merciful heavens!

Yonder stood that pitiless demon in human guise, face and figure fully revealed by the moonlight into which he had stepped to—

A wild, despairing cry broke from the lips of the doomed fugitive!

CHAPTER II.

THE RIVAL CLAIMANTS.

THE "Good Luck" Saloon was running wide open, as Thomas Gayworthy, better known perhaps in Leadville as "Ten-Strike Tom," or "King-Pin Sport," paused for a brief space upon its threshold to glance comprehensively over the crowd there assembled.

Rough and ready the crowd was, for the most part, but just what was to be expected in a place which was still but a mining-camp from a certain point of view, though with population sufficient to make it a city of the second class.

Nor was there any particular attempt at "putting on frills" exhibited by the Good Luck, or its master, "Pop-eyed Moses;" the latter big, burly, broad-shouldered, honest as the open day, slow of movement and sluggish of nature, yet capable of accomplishing wonders when once fairly aroused by friend or by foeman.

If there was little style about that bar, there was no lack of substantials. If one and the same decanter served peer and peasant, he who preferred "mixed drinks," was at liberty to do the shaking after taking, or could very readily induce others to take that trouble off his hands by simply dragging the tails of his coat, or parading with chip on shoulder for a scant minute by the clock.

Here and there were rough tables, for the most part utilized by card-players, though the Good Luck made no pretensions toward being a resort for gamblers.

So much Ten-Strike Tom took in at a single leisurely glance, although he was gaining no fresh knowledge through that preliminary survey, since this was by no means his initial call at the Good Luck.

Fairly crossing the threshold, he made his

way to the bar, where Pop-eyed Moses greeted him with a slow nod and a sleepy smile, one hand instinctively moving toward the whisky-decanter.

"Never mind, Moses," smoothly uttered the King Pin Sport, with a faint smile to match that negative head-shake. "I'm not irrigating this evening, but—no word, of course?"

His keen eyes glanced toward a copy each of the "Leadville Herald" and "Leadville Democrat" lying on the shelf back of the bar, then lifting to note the black-faced type of a poster pinned conspicuously to the wall.

"Never no word, as I knows on, suh," slowly answered the proprietor, as he, too, turned gaze upon that poster, sleepily scanning the word "REWARD!"

Thomas Gayworthy frowned in place of smiling, his keen eyes swiftly running over those bold lines where a liberal reward was promised any person who could or would give the undersigned information concerning one H. K. Jones; after which said Jones was urged to come forward and learn of something vastly to his own advantage.

Little or no attention was paid the twain by the crowd gathered beneath that roof, as Ten-Strike Tom and Pop-eyed Moses fell into confidential chat across the bar; but that chat was abruptly terminated as a short, enormously fat man waddled into the saloon, casting one quick look around, then pressing forward to the bar, pulling a rumpled copy of the *Herald* from his flannel shirt, slapping it down on the bar, thumping it with one fat and grimy paw, then pointing out a particular advertisement with a stumpy forefinger as he huskily rumbled:

"What's that, an' who's him as axes fer H. K.? Whar's the money into it, an' who pays how much? Hey? Say?"

Ten-Strike Tom had moved quietly to one side as that far from sweet or savory customer surged forward, at once summing him up as one of those ubiquitous bummers so prone to haunt saloons and other places of public resort, where bite or sup is to be picked up without cost to the bare-faced forager.

But now a spark of interest flashed up in his brain, and his second glance was keener and more comprehensive.

The fellow was more than fat; he was almost enormous, so far as circumference went, although hardly up to the average as to altitude.

Heavy cowhide boots, canvas trowsers, flannel shirt open from throat nearly to waistline, once of a brilliant red, but now discolored by sweat and patched with grease until only a hint of its former gaudiness remained.

A greasy felt hat was pushed far back on his frowsy pate, revealing a knobby forehead, shaggy eyebrows, a little pug nose, a dense crop of red bristles covering cheeks and chin, the same hue and texture as the enormous pair of mustaches which curled and twisted back beyond each ear, the wiry strands long enough to tie in a knot back of that fat neck!

This much Ten-Strike Tom took in, visually, then he spoke up, his tones a bit sharper than usual:

"Why do you ask? You're not H. K. Jones, surely!"

"Who dast fer to say *I hain't* when *I be*? Me! Right hyar! H. K. fer the head, an' Jones fer the tail! Jine 'em with a backbone, an' right thar ye hev it; H. K. Jones—an' Jones with a J., d'ye mind, too!"

In tones so deep as to almost sound sepulchral, and with a volubility difficult to match, came this assertion, and the fat man, thumbs stuck under his broad leather belt where hung huge knife and brace of navy revolvers, gazed half-insolently, half-doubtingly into the handsome face of the King-Pin Sport.

"You are the man mentioned in yonder poster, then?" asked Gayworthy.

"Shore as sart'in, an' true as honest facts! Them's me: Harry Kane Jones on common days, an' H. K. Jones fer Sunday!"

"Stiddy an' owld hon, there, will ye, now?" just then came a shrill, high-pitched and peculiarly accented voice from the front entrance; and as eyes shifted to suit, they saw a tall, roughly-clad personage stride across the threshold, one long arm gesticulating vigorously, the huge hand at its extremity gripping a copy of the *Leadville Democrat*.

"A success done wrecked, an' hyar comes the gee-raft!" rumbled the fat man, swinging his corporosity around to more squarely face this latest comer. "Whar's the monkey, an' whar's the baboon's sister?"

"Owld hon, gents!" repeated the new-comer, flourishing the paper as he advanced. "'Oo's takin' me name bin wain, 'ere? 'Oo's hawskin' for H. K. Jones? Wich his me, gents! Wich h'l'm willink for to make howth before hany bloomink beak has may—wich?"

The fat man broke into a sneering guffaw, his huge mustaches fairly bristling with subdued rage as he flung forth a dirty paw to snap thumb and forefinger sharply in the face of this latest arrival on the scene.

As once before, the keen eyes of the King-Pin Sport took a swift photograph of the fellow whose coming promised fair to give interest if not profit to Gayworthy's call at the Good Luck Saloon, and this is what he saw:

A tall, loose jointed, gangling figure, fully armed, clad in high boots, jeans trowsers, blue flannel shirt and battered s'raw hat.

His thin face and sharp nose hardly matched his accent, which was undeniably that of a London cockney, pure and undefiled.

"Takin' whose name in wain, I'm wantin' to know?" rumbled the fat man, sweeping his little pig-like eyes up and down that lengthy sample of humanity, then giving a scornful snort as summing up.

"Me name, hof course!" came the sharp answer.

The fat man gazed scornfully into that slowly flushing visage, then gave a short, insulting chuckle before saying:

"That's the name of a gentleman, sir, an' you try fer to make—"

The tall claimant swung forth his long arm, pushing the fat man out of his path, striding forward until his waist touched the bar, across which he leaned, to smite that poster sharply with clinched fist. Then he swung back, flashing a fiery look into the handsome visage of the King-Pin Sport, harshly speaking:

"That's me: that's my name! 'Oo his hit wants me, then?"

"I do; that is if you are the real H. K. Jones, who—"

Ten-Strike Tom began thus, but before his sentence could reach a legitimate termination, both claimants cut in, voices lifted and clinched hands gesticulating, each one seemingly in dead earnest.

"h'l'm the gent w'at his—"

"That's me, right what I live, fer—"

The rival claimant's broke off simultaneously, glaring at each other in glowing rage, then both breaking forth in adjurations which betokened blows unless some one of authority interfered right speedily.

That interference came from Thomas Gayworthy, and grasping a shoulder of each man, he pushed them back from the bar, into a clear space near the center of the apartment, then left them face to face, himself standing midway, coldly speaking:

"Bottle up all nonsense until later on. I'm business, and you want to talk business, or you'll think something has broken loose, and the whole world's gone off on a high bender. Now—business!"

Tapping the fat man on an arm, he spoke, sharply:

"You came first, so I'll talk to you first. Who are you?"

"Henry Kane Jones, better knowed whar I be knowed, as Harry Kane Jones—both with a J, ye want to keep in mind, boss!"

"And you, sir?" turning eyes upon the tall claimant.

"Hamilton King Jones, yer washup!" just as glibly asserted the latest arrival. "Better knowed, yer washup, has Hupper Krust Jones; which his like this, yer washup: haiteh fer hupper, hand kay fer krust!"

"Good lawd an' holy smoke!" exploded the fat man, hands on hips and chin lifted high as his head went back with a snort of disgust. "I do like a liar, but—waal, critter, you please me too mighty well!"

"Upper Crust" Jones twisted his eyes far enough to scornfully scan the face of his rival for a brief space, then reared back on his dignity, loftily uttering:

"Hand pray, 'oo may you be, hany 'ow?"

"Who mought I be, hey? Wa-al, I mought be a durned old fraud, moseyin' 'round the country on the credit of a honest gentleman's

name and repetition; I mought be all *this*, but I jest hain't, all the same! But *you*—who be you, any way, critter?"

"H. K. Jones, besquire, hotherwise Hupper Krust—"

"Oh, come out o' that, ye rolled-out angle-worm of a 'postor!" indignantly exploded the fat claimant, cutting short the very explanation he had himself invited. "Upper Crust be dinged! Jones be thundered! *You* the likes o' all them? Booh!"

"Do you deny that this gentleman is the genuine H. K. Jones, sir?" asked Ten-Strike Tom, gravely as to voice, but with a bright devil dancing in his keen eyes.

"Do I? When I'm the gentleman my own self?"

"Never! *hI'm* the gent, hand hif hI don't—"

"Oh, go hunt a hole to crawl inside of, you!" scornfully thundered the man of mighty voice. "Ef thar's any H. K. hitched onto *you*, it's a mighty sight more like this: H fer Humbly, K fer Kuss, J fer Joker; Humbly Kuss Joker!"

By this time nearly all in the saloon were watching and listening, ready to enjoy whatever of sport might result from this conflict of claims; but neither of the trio more deeply interested seemed aware of this growing notice, and Ten-Strike Tom once more interfered to hold the tall claimant in check as, enraged by that scoffing insult, he clinched his fists and seemed on the point of assaulting the fat man.

"Having so summarily disposed of this gentleman, of course you can make good your own claims to the title of— What is your name, anyway?"

"Henry Kane Jones, an' nary time be I 'shame fer to 'knowledge it, neither," quickly answered the corpulent claimant. "Harry-cane, for short, or when I git my ebenezzer up-an'-still a-risin'; or H fer Han'some, an' K fer Kreetur: Han'some Kreetur Jones! Which is what the toney ladies call me, mostly!"

With a smirk and a bow came this unblushing assertion, but in place of the smile which it invited, the face of Thomas Gayworth wore a dark frown as he stepped back a pace, white hands motioning one to each of the rival claimants, his voice sounding cold and stern as it shaped the word:

"I've listened to you both with greater lenience than you really merit, unless I'm vastly mistaken in my summing up. Not to put too fine a gloss upon it, I believe you are both of you rank frauds, and no more worthy to bear the name of H. K. Jones than I am to wear wings and play on a golden harp in realms above!"

"Good—*Lawd!*"

"Well, hI *ham* hastonished!"

"That's all right, both. I want H. K. Jones, and stand ready to pay a handsome reward to any one who produces the Original Jacobs, but—"

"Hyar he stan's, an' I'm your huckleberry, boss!" cried the fat man.

"Hoh, jumpin' Jemima!" fairly howled the cockney, losing all self-control at that unblushing assertion. "hA mule couldn't kick the truth hout hof ye, ye bloomin' fraud, ye!" and at the same time he lifted a big foot, to drive it violently against that protrusive stomach!

CHAPTER III.

THE FARCE TURNS TO TRAGEDY.

TAKEN completely by surprise, Henry Kane Jones recoiled with an explosive grunt, his wonderfully mustached head coming forward as his equator drew in before that insolent foot, one pudgy paw flying to the injured region, while the other snatched wildly at a pistol-butt.

Ten-Strike Tom was taken almost as much off his guard, for he by no means credited either claimant with genuine fighting disposition.

He saw Hamilton King Jones fling hand back to where his rusty pistol hung, while, with ejaculations of sudden-alarm, the grinning card-players began to scatter in quest of safer quarters before the lead should commence to fly on the loose.

"Steady, all!"

Sharp and peremptory rung forth that voice, and the King-Pin Sport shot forth a white hand to grasp and twist the gun from the grip of the fat claimant, sweeping it

swiftly around to rap the tall fellow's wrist with the barrel just as his rusty revolver came to the front.

With marvelous dexterity was all this performed, so rapidly that it would have been difficult for even the keenest of eyes to distinguish more than the general result: two men disarmed, a third drawing back a bit with a bland smile on handsome face, as his neatly-shod foot kicked aside the mate to the weapon he now held in his right hand.

"Steady, all!" came the warning repetition. "Scratch and clapperclaw all your stomachs call for, but no mutual suicide, gentlemen!"

"*hI'll* teach 'im to hinsult ha gent w'at never done nothink but lay 'onest claim to 'is hown!" shrilly squealed the gangling claimant, his face flushed with anger and his thin nose glowing like a beacon-light amid that grizzled beard. "*hI'll* show 'im 'ow ha gent—"

"Ow-wow to thunder-an'-guns!" bellowed the fat claimant, regaining the wind which had been so surely knocked out of him by that vigorous application of manufactured cowhide. "Dug-gun my sister's black-eyed bob-tailed cat's speckled kittens! *Whar* is he who— Cl'ar the track, ye b'iled-shirt an' stiff-hatted pessence-eddlers! Le' me git at him! Jest le' me 'tarnally chaw up the p'izen fish-worm o' nastiness which— Use me karkidge fer a do'-mat, will ye? Wipe yer toad squasher all over— Oh, 'tarnal death an' ge-lorious sanctification!"

Fairly swelling with rage until his fat body bulged out on either side of that embracing belt so far that the leather was almost hidden from sight, the fat claimant puffed and snorted, his face turned purple, his little pig-like eyes almost lost between brows and bristles.

Words failed him for the instant, and he could only stand on widely-planted feet, glaring furiously upon his rival, the picture of impotent rage.

Hardly less excited was Hamilton King, though he still retained a degree of dignity, his head thrown back, his eyes looking down his thin nose at that swelling shape as he slowly uttered:

"*His 'ee* ha toad, hor just ha bag hof spoilt wind, somebody?"

"Toad? Bag of— Cl'ar the road, fer now I *be* a-comin'!" fairly exploded the corpulent claimant, wildly flourishing his short but thick arms. "Look out! Harrycane done bu'sted loose! Whoo-ee!"

With the lunge of a mad bull, Henry Kane lunged forward to a close, and though Hamilton King planted both right and left fists squarely in that fat face, each blow breaking the skin and bringing the hot blood, he was unable to check that angry rush, and grappling fiercely, the two men went down together with a shock which caused the glassware to jingle and clink right merrily.

Ten-Strike Tom deftly tossed the revolver which he had wrested from the corpulent claimant across the bar to Pop-eyed Moses, and deftly avoiding those wildly-flying feet as the rivals rolled over and over each other in their furious grapple, he contrived to snatch from their persons both pistol and knives, then drawing back with a short laugh of grim amusement, willing enough to let the bummers have their farce out.

So long as their close grapple lasted, little injury could be done by either, and, even should the matter grow more serious, what matter?

"Frauds and liars—both!"

More than Thomas Gayworthy gave that same verdict, yet the audience gathered around, cheering the fighters, evidently caring little which was on top, just so "the fun" lasted long enough.

But, just as the excitement reached the boiling point, a wild, ear-piercing scream rose above the racket, plainly coming from just without the door of the Good Luck Saloon.

Almost involuntarily every pair of eyes, save those belonging to the claimants, turned toward the entrance, and as they did so, there rung forth the sharp report of a rifle: *crack-crack-crack!*

Three shots, following one the other so closely as to seem but one prolonged report; another wild yell as of mortal agony blending with intense affright; then the shape of a human being came in at the open door,

flinging up both arms and reeling dizzily for an instant before pitching headlong to the sanded floor!

There was nothing counterfeited there. Only a corpse, or a human being surely marked by grim death as his prey, could fall like that—the fall of a bag of sand!

With the others, Ten-Strike Tom had wheeled to face the front when that first scream of deadly horror burst upon their ears, and as that ragged shape came reeling over the threshold, his eyes were swift to note the red blood which was rapidly marking that front.

Only one branded by death could bleed like that!

Trained by a wild and roving life, the King-Pin Sport was first of them all to rally and take action, crying out sharply:

"Look to the man, some of you! *I'll* care for the outside!"

The words were still crossing his lips as he sprung to the side of the room where two windows showed, and without wasting time in trying to lift and prop up a sash, the King-Pin Sport rose from the sanded floor in an agile bound, his feet shooting out in advance, striking the wooden sash with a deft force which drove out all, splintered glass flying in every direction as that neatly-garbed figure shot through the opening, to alight safely upon his feet with the building at his back.

Few men could have performed the feat so adroitly, even while giving all thought to the exploit, but Ten-Strike Tom was an exception to the average, and as he shot through the air and the window, his hands were arming themselves, and his eyes were flashing around in quest of the slayer—avenger or assassin, as the case might prove.

On that side lay several vacant lots, wholly unimproved, though plentifully decorated with emptied tins which had once contained meat, fish, fruits or vegetables.

Weeds grew sparsely, stones and rocks lay here and there, yet none of them all affording secure cover for a hiding criminal; and as there certainly were no fleeing figures in motion thereaway, Ten-Strike Tom knew the as yet unknown slayer could not have sought flight in that direction.

As soon as he felt sure of so much, the King-Pin Sport sprung forward, sweeping his eyes from side to side as his scope of vision widened, for it seemed hardly possible that the slayer could have vanished so abruptly.

And yet, where was the rifleman?

Not a living soul was in sight as the Sport reached the front of the Good Luck Saloon, and unless—

Revolver in hand, ready for instant use, Gayworthy dashed across to where the shadows lay deepest, cast by the buildings on the other side of the street; but once again his hopes were frustrated.

No man was skulking there, and as the sound of excited voices came even more distinctly from the interior of the saloon, where farce had so unexpectedly been changed to tragedy, Ten-Strike Tom abandoned his vain quest for the moment, turning back to that lighted doorway.

"Who is he? What cause for such a bold killing? Is it murder, or a justifiable homicide?"

These, and kindred questions, were flashing through the brain of the handsome adventurer as he moved toward the saloon, more slowly than he might have done only for his natural reluctance to give over an unrewarded pursuit.

He paused briefly at the entrance, taking in the scene quickly, noting that the rival claimants had quit their awkward scramble and were now drawn apart, each one looking at the form which still lay as it had fallen on the sanded floor.

A number of men were gathered about that figure, but none were trying to stanch that flow of blood, or making any effort to ascertain whether or no 'twas something more than the corpse it surely seemed, just then.

"Out of the way, gents!" commanded the King-Pin Sport as he came forward. "If you're above helping, don't stoop to hinder! Room—give me room, will you?"

The crowd fell aside promptly enough, for it was not lack of heart or of sympathy

which caused their irresolution so much as it was the want of presence of mind when an unexpected emergency presented itself.

Questions were poured upon the Sport who had taken it upon himself to investigate the cause of that crimson deed, but Ten-Strike Tom was not in the humor for wasting time in explanations, just then.

"Swarm and scatter, those of ye who call yourselves white men!" he cried as he dropped to his knees by the side of the fallen stranger, hands and eyes as busy as tongue was nimble. "Out, and hunt for the villain who turned this trick! Nab him if you can find him, and we'll question his rights as executioner later on! Go—and find, if it's in the wood!"

He spoke like one holding full authority, and such men are usually obeyed without question by the lower herd; so it was now, and with hands seeking weapons, tongues uttering grim threats, the crowd melted away as by magic, to mingle outside with others who had been drawn toward the Good Luck Saloon by the sounds of fire-arms.

This was by no means the first time Ten-Strike Tom had examined gun-shot victims, and it took but a casual look to show him this poor fellow had scarce a show for life, though the vital spark had not yet fled for good and all.

"Clear the lunch-counter, Moses!" Gayworthy commanded, glancing up from that brief investigation. "This dirty floor is no place for a man to draw his last breath! Now—steady she goes!"

With an admirable blending of gentleness and care with strength of arm and will, the King-Pin Sport lifted that bleeding figure from the stained floor, bearing his helpless burden across the nearly vacant room to the substantial table, or counter, from which Pop eyed Moses was now clearing the "free lunch."

Gently depositing his burden there, Gayworthy deftly opened his torn and stained garments for a more thorough inspection, only to more than confirm his first estimate: the stranger had been struck fairly in the bosom with two bullets, both of which had passed entirely through his body.

"Any show, pardner?" slowly asked the proprietor; but Ten-Strike Tom shook his head in grave negation.

"Not the ghost of a show for life, I'm afraid, Moses. He's still alive, but—give me a little whisky, will you?"

With wonderful celerity for one so sluggish, Pop-eyed Moses procured the stimulant desired, and silently watched the King Pin Sport as he administered a small portion of the fiery liquor.

The wounded man seemed almost past swallowing, but a little of the liquor trickled down his throat, and caused him to catch his breath and partly strangle, which certainly helped bring back his nearly gone vitality.

"We're friends," distinctly uttered Gayworthy as he saw those eyes open with a frightened stare at the face bending over him. "You're safe now, and—who shot you?"

The poor fellow shivered and shrunk away, giving a low, inarticulate cry as he did so.

Ten-Strike Tom forced a little more whisky into his mouth, and the stimulant seemed to lend him fresh strength if not renewed courage.

But the one who was caring for him knew that this was nothing more than the final flicker of the candle before going out forever, and wishing to solve the bloody mystery, while well aware that so urging could make no particular difference with that frail lease of life, he asked again, in slow, distinct accents:

"Who did this ugly deed, my friend? Who are you? What is your name?"

Again that shudder of terror, born of the long and desperate hunt for his life; but then the dying man seemed to rally, lifting a trembling hand as though to brush the gathering mists from before his eyes, partly raising himself on his other arm as he stared dimly about the room.

"I don't—if he finds—God!"

"Who is he? And you: who are you, friend?" reiterated Gayworthy.

"He—I—Jones!" came in a husky series of gasps.

"What Jones do you mean?" swiftly demanded Ten-Strike Tom.

"H. K. Jones, and—"

That was all. The voice was voiceless!

CHAPTER IV.

WHO FIRED THE DEATH SHOTS?

THE death-claimed stranger flung up both arms, his fingers wildly clutching at vacancy as the blood oozed from his parting lips, his head falling back to strike the bare boards with an audible thud as the startled Sport failed in his effort to lend support.

But, the poor fellow never felt that blow. Death had claimed its prey at last, and the vital spark had fled before that head touched its improvised cooling-board.

Ten-Strike Tom realized as much on the instant, and knowing that the stranger was beyond his power to aid, he turned eyes toward the door, beyond which now arose excited voices.

"Looks like the boys done ketched the shooter, eh?" muttered Moses, likewise looking in that direction. "Ef this yer' critter kin 'dentify him as— Ge thunder!"

He had turned to glance into the face of the man of whom he was talking, just then, and so for the first time divined the truth, as written upon that haggard, lined, though still youthful face.

"Done croaked, or I'm a liar!"

"Yes, but— Guard him, Moses!" ordered the Sport, as he stepped a little more to the front. "Don't let any of the gang touch him until— Steady, now!"

There was hardly time to give more explicit instructions, but slow though he might be, physically, Moses was keen and quick enough of wit to both take and act upon a hint, when it came from a thoroughly trustworthy quarter.

Even as he spoke, the foremost of those outside had reached the door, supporting between them the limp and nearly insensible figure of a roughly-clad man.

"Who have you there, gents?" demanded the Sport, stepping forward, leaving the proprietor to guard the dead. "Not—what!" as he recognized the fellow who was then being lowered to the floor by his carriers.

"Vince Purkiss, all right, sir!" volunteered one of those who had been foremost in entering the saloon.

"But he never—did he?"

"Naw, he never didn't!" harshly cut in another of that little mob.

The last speaker stepped to the front, one hand resting on the butt of a horn-handled knife, the other turned protectingly toward the nearly senseless fellow now lying on the blood-stained floor.

There was a grimly fierce, half-defiant expression upon his not uncomely face as he spoke again:

"He never done that, ef ye mean the shootin'—Vince Purkiss never didn't now. He jest—you kin swear to us findin' him, Deacon Rank? You know he never didn't hurt—Jest look at the eyes of him, will ye?"

Another gesture pointed his meaning still more clearly, and as the now reviving man made a move, turning his face more squarely toward the light, Tom saw that a heavy blow must have struck the fellow full between the eyes, cutting his nose and discoloring both optics.

"Deacon Rank" Ballinger responded to that appeal by a slow but emphatic nod of his gray head, one hand combing the "billy-goat" beard which alone ornamented his coarse-featured face.

"I don't reckon Purkiss turned the trick, sir, but mebbe he knows who did do the job, all the same!"

"Tell the whole of it, please," ordered the Sport. "You were one of those who picked him up, I infer?"

Deacon Rankin Ballinger nodded his head, still combing his grizzled beard.

"Mebbe thar's them as kin tell a fuller story, sir," he began, like one who feels he has an abundance of time to spare; and at that, Gayworthy turned to another of the party.

"You tell, Wilson. What did you find out, besides this fellow?"

"This, Ten-Strike," promptly answered the man addressed, holding out a service-worn Winchester repeating-rifle. "I stepped on it just at the corner, 'cross the street, and then—by close looking—this!"

He held forth an empty cartridge-case of the same caliber, and as Ten-Strike Tom lift-

ed the shell to his nose, he knew by the scen that the cartridge had been fired quite recently.

Holding the rifle where all might see, he worked the lever, deftly catching another empty shell as it was ejected by the smoothly-working mechanism. Comparing the shells, he found them of the same caliber.

"The stranger was shot—twice!" he said, gravely, as he slipped the empty shells into his pocket, then looked the rifle over quickly, as though hoping to find some mark or clue to prove its ownership.

If any such discovery was made, he failed to mention the fact, and then stepped back to place the weapon behind the bar, where it could not well be meddled with by unauthorized hands.

Returning, he asked Wilson to resume his report.

That was briefly enough delivered, now the weapon had been fully accounted for.

"We was too late to jump the critter who done the shooting, sir, but just a bit around the next corner, we found Vince Purkiss, laid out like he was too cold to skin!"

"Then he could hardly have done the shooting, you think?"

"It don't look like it, do you reckon, boss?"

"Nur it hain't like it, nuther!" harshly growled Dan Mixon, the fellow who had been so swift to speak a word in defense of his helpless partner a short time before.

"Vince never—why should he, then?"

"Why should any person, for that matter?" bluntly cut in the Ten-Strike Sport, with a half-impatient gesture. "Still, there's been foul murder done, and if we're white men, we'll never rest until we've probed the case to its very bottom!"

"That's all right, an' I'll go in jest as deep as ary one o' ye all, when it comes down to bed-rock; but, them as throws dirt at my pard, chucks mud at me! An' when he cain't fight back fer him own self, then Dan Mixon's doin' the hot work fer all two both—see?"

Savagely sullen though his words were, and coarse his speech, there was a grim sort of heroism about the tough that brought an approving smile to the handsome visage of the King-Pin Sport.

No man living could more thoroughly appreciate such blind fidelity as this, and he made a mental note of the trait for possible use in the future.

Whatever reply he might have made to those words, however, was put aside by the abrupt arousing of the battered pard, who lifted himself to his feet, leaning heavily upon the strong arm which Dan Mixon instantly placed at his service.

For the minute he was too dizzy for coherent speech, but as he began to rally once more, Ten-Strike Tom spoke directly to him:

"You saw the fellow who did this shooting, Purkiss; who was it?"

"Who says I see'd 'im?"

"That face of yours, for one thing, but—didn't you see him?"

Vincent Purkiss almost rudely shook away that supporting arm, and snatching the dirt-marked hat from a half-extended hand, put it on his head, slouching the brim as though to in part mask his bruised face.

He flashed a slow, surly glance around, possibly counting the chances for and against his escaping from the saloon without talking further; but if such was his real temptation, he saw too much ardent curiosity to run the risk, just then.

"Waal, ef ye cain't git 'long 'thout the hull of it, hyar she comes, all into a heap!"

"I was jest sort o' sa'nterin' 'long by my lonesome, when I hearn the shootin', an' thinkin' mebbe thar'd be fun 'nough flyin' 'round fer me to ketch a mouthful while t'others was gittin' a squar' meal, I jest up-foot an' come this way a-hikin' in a holy hurry!"

"And you saw—just what?"

"A durned sight mo' stars then I ever see afore, even on a dead cl'ar night!" with a touch of grim humor unusual in one of his saturnine disposition. "Fer I jest run chuck up 'g'inst a club, or some sech. An' then—waal, I tuck a lay-down, an' thar I was when the posse come up."

"But you surely saw the fellow who slugged you; who was he?" persisted the

Sport, all the more eager to know, since he saw how reluctant Purkiss was to make that identity known to the gathering.

He gave a low, surly growl then mumbled:

"That's all right, boss! Mebbe I'd know the critter ag'in ef I was to meet him, an' mebbe I wouldn't. Ary way, I hain't namin' no names—jest right now, nohow—I hain't!"

Ten Strike Tom paused for a brief space, keenly scanning that dark visage, then he abruptly demanded:

"Was it H. K. Jones, Purkiss?"

The fellow gave a slight start, then stared with wider eyes into the face of his inquisitor, bluntly ejaculating:

"Who's he? Who's Jones, aryhow?"

A rumbling howl came from the lips of the corpulent claimant, who surged forward, gesticulating as he came, with the explosive speech:

"That's jest what! Who's H. K. Jones, I'm axin' of ye all? Hyar's me; I'm one! Thar's Humbly Kuss; he's two! An' now you're spoutin' 'bout still another H. K.!"

"hAnd hI'm the hownly lawfully legal claimant—hI ham, too!" the lengthy claimant squealingly interposed.

"Oh, go bait a hook fer bullheads—you!" disgustingly rumbled his rival, with a gesture of supreme scorn; then turning once more upon the King-Pin Sport, to add the words:

"Right hyer ye see two as lays claim to bein' H. K. Jones, boss, an' now ef thar's still another—ef we're triplets—jest let us know it fer dead-shore, so we kin git down to cussin' of our mother, who didn't hev no mo' manners then to—oh, whar's the use? Who kin do full jestic to sech a dog-gun 'diculosity?"

With a despairing gesture the fat man fell back, and, satisfied that he could wring no further information from Vince Purkiss, Ten-Strike Tom turned toward the counter where the dead stranger lay, one hand lightly touching that motionless breast as he slowly spoke:

"Form in single file and circle past, gentlemen. I want to learn if possible who this poor fellow was in life, and if any man among you all can recognize him—well, that later on!"

Awed in a measure by that unwonted gravity, the men present complied with that request, but each one passed on in silence, shaking head in mute answer to the question which the eyes of Thomas Gayworthy asked each in their turn.

When the inspection was complete, without any person recognizing the corpse, Gayworthy spoke:

"To my knowledge, I never saw this poor fellow before to-night; but he was somebody's darling, some time, and as such, I'll pay all expenses and see that he has an honest if not exactly a stylish burial. All I ask is, that some of you gentlemen who have less pressing business on your hands than I unfortunately have, will sort of oversee matters."

A murmur of approval greeted this generous speech, and Gayworthy added, in the same sober tones:

"With you all as witnesses, gentlemen, I'll go through the poor fellow's clothes, on the off-chance of finding something by which he may be identified, and so enable us to notify absent relatives or friends. Is there any objections raised?"

"Jest so ye don't find ary proof as he's H. K.—Ouch!"

An unseen hand had lent the fat claimant a covert punch below the belt, and noting sundry menacing frowns on all sides, he wisely subsided for the time being, while Ten-Strike Tom deliberately proceeded to search the corpse for means of identification.

He found the garments more than damp, as though he who wore them in life had been forced to wade or swim river or creek before reaching Leadville; it seemed as though that new fact was all his search was destined to bring to light.

But, from a pocket in the gray-flannel shirt worn by the dead man, he drew forth a small, folded bit of dirty and wet paper; wet with the damp which pervaded all those garments.

Feeling that here at last must be a clue, Gayworthy cautiously unfolded the paper, bending close to the lamp as he strove in

vain to decipher the blurred writing that scrap of paper contained.

There were only a few fragments of words to be made out, among them "—son Bar—" and the two initials "H. K." For fully ten long minutes he pored over that bit of paper, but at the end of that period he abandoned his efforts, in present despair. As he lifted his head to flash a keen glance around over those present, he sharply ejaculated:

"Where's Vince Purkiss and his pard, Dan Mixon?"

CHAPTER V.

VINCE PURKISS GOES TO PLAY EVEN.

For a brief space silence followed that abrupt question; then a volunteer voice was lifted, with the words:

"They done racked out, like they was in a hurry to git somewhar, a good bit ago, boss!"

"An' Deacon Rank hit pritty much the same lick, like he was camped onto thar' trail, or else wanted to keep 'em from feelin' too mighty lonesome by thar' two own selves," came from a second quarter.

So far as the two first-named persons were concerned, this information was perfectly correct.

The two pards had joined that line as suggested by the King-Pin Sport, and were among the first to view the corpse, passing on with that mute negative as Thomas Gayworthy interrogated them.

As they made way for those next in line, Vince Purkiss pushed back a hand to give his friend a significant pinch, then edged silently toward the front door, passing swiftly over the threshold as he saw Ten-Strike Tom wholly absorbed in watching the men reviewing that motionless body on the lunch-counter.

Faithful as his own shadow, Dan Mixon followed the lead of his pard, but before he could ask the question which rose to his lips, the bruised "rounder" growlingly muttered:

"Take to the bresh, like I'm a-doin', pardner! Skin out, 'fore that durn 'quisitive Ten-Strike kin pucker to come ag'in!"

While speaking thus, Purkiss turned abruptly to the left, swinging around the corner of the Good Luck Saloon cutting diagonally across the vacant lots, making for a dense mass of shade bordering the incomplete buildings which loomed up in that quarter.

Not until this secure cover was reached did Vince Purkiss slacken his silent speed, or volunteer any information as to his reasons for "racking out" from the Good Luck in such suspicious haste.

He turned to his faithful shadow, saying grimly:

"Mebbe you don't jest know it, pard, but I'm gwine fer to fairly jolt the daylight's out o' the p'izen critter who—The deuce!"

Vince Purkiss broke off abruptly, hand seeking knife-hilt as his restless gaze was caught and fixed by a roving figure near the Good Luck Saloon.

That figure was in motion, and just as certainly coming their way, over the vacant lots. If it had been bound instead of human, it could not have followed more true to their trail!

"Ef it's that devil who—"

"It's the deacon, Vince," softly whispered Mixon, his vision clearer than that of his battered pard, for the time being. "Shell I lend him a jolt, ef he comes too mighty nigh, then?"

A brief silence, as though the ugly-tempered tough was inwardly debating the advisability of such a reception; but the oncoming figure lifted an open palm, speaking in tones barely loud enough to reach the ears for which they were intended:

"Flag o' truce, my gentle sinners! I'm comin' in all peace unto ye, an' it'd be a pe-ky shame ef ye was to give a kick fer a holy kiss!"

"He's shuckin' the rags o' sin, an' climbin' into his holy gyarmints!" muttered Dan Mixon, half in mockery, half in seriousness.

"Shell I jolt him, pardner?"

"Button up! Ef thar's ary joltin' needed, reckon I kin—Stiddy thar, Deak!"

"The flag o' peace is still a floatin', oh, my gentle sinners!" came in turn from the

deacon, both of his hands now rising above his head, but his neck taking a sudden twist as his gaze turned backward as though with sudden apprehension.

"Reckon I'd better hit the dark', fellows, 'fore that ungodly Ten-Strike Tom bulges out fer to ketch—jest so!"

Like one fairly insured against harm, if not assured of a welcome, Rankin Ballinger pushed forward, only pausing when close to the two pards, and enveloped by the shadows which covered them.

"What's it 'bout Ten-Strike?" gruffly demanded Purkiss

"He's red-hot to ketch on to the rights o' this bit o' trouble, an' ef he was to line ye off on a sudden trip like this, it's heavy odds you don't shake him cl'ar 'thout lettin' him know all you know—an' all you're takin' fer granted, as well!"

"I don't see what you—"

"That's all right, pardner," briskly cut in the deacon, with a wave of his grimy paw. "I look on you gents as part o' my reg'lar congregation, an' so I'm gwine 'long to see you don't come to no harm this blessed night: so thar!"

"Yes, you be!"

"Fer a dead shore fact, Vincent! I'd a heap sight ruther go with you, but ef I cain't do no better, then I'll tag 'long behind with Ten-Strike Tom to help keep my sperrets up! Now, which shell she be, gents?"

Purkiss flung forth a hand with an angry vehemence at this.

"Nyther one nur t'other! Ez fer Tom Gayworthy—"

Deacon Rank spat sharply to one side, scraping a sole swiftly as a further token of intense disapproval.

"Augh! He makes me all-over tired! He puts on too mighty many fancy frills! An' who's he, to want to run the whole town the way o' this? Why, jest to think—"

"That's all right, pardner," gruffly interrupted the tough, in his turn. "I hain't no sort o' use fer the Sport, my own self, but when I want to blackguard him, reckon I'll do it to his face, not ahind his back, like you saints play it, anyway!"

Deacon Ballinger made a deprecatory gesture, but it was scarcely heeded, and Purkiss spoke on:

"Yes or no don't make no difference to me, Deak. I'm gwine fer to play even fer this jolt I ketched, ef it takes a hind leg off!"

"I'm more'n ready to help you play even, pardner, fer—"

"Which I hain't a-wantin', an' that's talk with the bark on, Deak! You go your way, jest as we're gwine mine. An'—ef you're not quite through with this yer' world o' sin an' tribble-ation, Deak, I don't reckon you'd best trail us ary furdur: see?"

With a significant gesture, Purkiss turned from the elder man, nodding to Don Mixon as a signal to follow the lead he was now giving.

The two pards walked away at a brisk gait for some little distance, then looking over a shoulder to make sure the deacon was not dogging them, Vince muttered by way of explanation:

"Mebbe the critter was playin' clean white, an' mebbe he wasn't. No mighty matter 'ither way, fer I kin serve my own self when it comes to— I say, pardner!"

"Keep on a-sayin' of it, Purkiss!"

"You're with me, hain't ye, Dan?"

"You bet I be, pardner!"

"Good enough! Now I'm openin' up to ye, pardner, an' this is jest the way of it all: You know what a nasty jolt I ketched, back yender?"

Mixon nodded.

"All right! Mind ye, now, I wasn't lyin' when I told yen' Sport 'twasn't more'n a weenty glimpse I done ketched o' the critter afore he laid me out, mighty nigh cold 'nough fer skinnin'; but, all the same, I couldn't mistake the p'izen critter ef I was to try to, hard!"

"Who was it, Vince?"

"I'm gwine fer to look the critter up at his own den, right now, pardner: will you back me up in the job?"

"Who was it, Purkiss?"

"Patsy McCarthy, no less!"

Dan Mixon gave a visible start at this name, and twisting that surprise to his disadvantage, the tough surlily growled:

"All right, my covey, if that's the way it strikes ye! I'm askin' nyther odds 'n' favors o' fri'nds ur foes. I'll go it alone."

"That rough jolt's sort o' upshot your level, pardner, or you wouldn't sling your clapper all crooked like that! All I wanted was fer you to p'int out the right head so plain I couldn't make no mistake when it come to hittin' fer keeps: see?"

With a warm grip of the hand, which closed upon his own, the brief cloud drifted away, leaving not even a shadow on the friendly horizon.

Vince Purkiss moved onward once more, now and then casting a wary glance around, like one who has no desire to be dogged by friend or by foe, and, in like manner, letting fall an occasional sentence, by putting which together Dan Mixon finally had a fairly accurate notion of the actual facts.

Although Vince Purkiss had been taken completely by surprise, and had caught but a fleeting glimpse of the man who leaped upon him with slung-shot or pair of metal knuckles, striking as he came, like one who meant to break a skull if it lay in the way, he had no hesitation in swearing he had by that transitory vision recognized an old enemy, one Patsy McCarthy by name.

Dan Mixon knew who that was, and his face took on sterner lines as he thought of what might be lying in advance: not from Patsy himself, although the burly Irishman was surely a tough nut to crack, but from the gang at whose head he stood.

Still, the taciturn pard never flinched. Where his mate might lead, there he was ready to follow, willing to take his share of the hard knocks, and just as many which by rights belonged to that mate, as he could contrive to turn his way.

Vince Purkiss also made clear his plan of campaign, wasting few words in setting it forth, since bold simplicity formed its first, last, total features.

"We'll look him up at his hole, fu'st, an' ef he hain't thar—waal, we'll run the durn town through a sifter ontel we do find him!"

"I'm hopin' we'll ketch him at home, then," quietly observed Mixon.

"I hain't a-keerin', jest so we do find 'im!"

"Fer ef thar, 'tain't likely he'll hev his hull gang to the back o' him—see?" explained the less voluble tough.

Purkiss slouched onward, doggedly following the course he had marked out for himself from the first, yet flashing keen glances around, as though haunted by a suspicion of being spied upon.

The two pards soon approached a story-and-a-half building which certainly could not be more than a few years old, since the town itself was no more ancient than that, yet already showing signs of decay, so hastily and carelessly had it been run up to meet a pressing want.

Here it was that Patsy McCarthy lived, with Biddy, his wife, for sole companion in his hours of ease; for children had they none, as the plain-spoken washerwoman gave hearty thanks whenever Patsy came home with a full load aboard—and that was often enough, too!

Pausing where the shadow cast by the nearest building served to mask their shapes, the two took a slow and thorough survey of the place.

A dim ray of light slipping past the edge of a cloth curtain at one of those dormer windows which broke the roof outline, showed that the shanty occupant was upstairs for the night.

"He's up yender, or thar'd be lights on the lower level!" muttered Purkiss, as he tightened his belt and stretched out his sinewy arms like one who feels a tough struggle lies just ahead. "All right! Ef I hain't missed my guess wuss than I commonly does, it'll be a heap-sight easier to git in at yen' door, then on the lower level!"

"It's a bu'st-in you mean, pardner?" asked Mixon.

"Reckon Patsy'd open for a common call?" gruffly laughed the other tough, moving around toward the opposite end of that dwelling, where an outside stairway led to the upper half-story. "Augh! It's a s'prise party that'll ketch the divil slickest—see?"

Although he spoke so boldly, Purkiss evidently did not too greatly underestimate his

enemy, for he paused when at the foot of those rickety steps, both ears and eyes on the keen alert for a full minute.

Nothing greeted either sense more than the ordinary sounds of the night, and fairly satisfied that, so far at least, his sworn enemy had no idea of his dangerous proximity, the tough slowly began to mount the stairs, closely followed by his devoted pard.

They gained the small square leading under the projecting eaves, and Purkiss bent an ear to the frail wooden door which alone barred their passage now.

"Never a sound, Dan!" he reported, rising and turning a massive shoulder toward the door. "All eyes open now, for—hyar goes!"

With a heavy surge, he dashed his shoulder against the door, adding his full weight to the shock in order to make all sure.

CHAPTER VI.

A LIONESS IN THE PATH.

ONLY a specially-prepared door could successfully have resisted such an assault as this, and with a splintering sound, the fastenings gave way, the barrier swinging wide, to admit the two pards, both with weapons in their hands and ready for hot and stern business.

The thud, the crackling, the slam of the ruined door as it swung violently back against the plastered wall, made noise enough to almost waken the dead, let alone rouse the sleeping, and the toughs saw a portly figure spring from a chair near a rude table on which stood a flaring candle in its tallow-dotted stick.

"Ow wow! What the divil d'ye m'ane, annyhow?"

Thus exploded this startled woman; but, instead of rushing forward to a close with thirsty blade, Vince Purkiss actually recoiled, giving a short malediction as he flashed a wicked glance around that poorly-furnished chamber.

He had counted upon taking his bitterest enemy by surprise, but instead—here he was confronted only by Bridget McCarthy, dutiful spouse to Patsy, the Bold!

More useful than ornamental, braver than beautiful, Biddy McCarthy was certainly a host in herself, if size and physical dimensions alone be taken into consideration.

If her eyes were small, her mouth made ample amends in the opposite direction. If her nose savored of the pug, her powerful jaws certainly favored that royal cousin, the bull-dog!

With shawl-shielded shoulders which were broad enough for a heavy-weight prize-fighter, and bared arms which nature had generously supplied with muscle, toughened and added to by years of daily labor over wash-board and clothes-wringer; with body and lower limbs in just proportion, surely this now startled woman made an obstacle in the way which even yonder tough could not afford to wholly despise.

That first sweeping glance convinced Purkiss that his particular game of that night was not in that chamber, and with difficulty smothering a vicious curse, he harshly demanded:

"Whar's Patsy, Mrs. McCarthy?"

"Faix, an' who's ye that's askin' that same, thin?" splutteringly exploded the woman, brushing a red and toil-roughened hand across her eyes, where slumber was still lingering as though loth to depart for good.

"That's all right, whoever I be. Whar's the dirty cur hidin' from his—"

"Ow-wow!" fairly roared the now thoroughly awakened woman, her eyes flashing like fire, her face turning purple with hot rage as she plunged across to where the stove was standing, stooping to catch up a heavy iron poker. "To yerself that same dirt, begorra! An' hoidin', is it? Augh! yaugh! will ye, thin?"

And so fierce was her indignation over that insult to her husband, the amazon plunged forward, swinging the heavy poker as she charged, aiming blow after blow at the head of Vince Purkiss, either one of which would surely have split his skull had the two come in fair contact.

But, the tough knew right well how to hand-guard his head, and with the stout knife which he had drawn in readiness for use on Patsy McCarthy as his shoulder burst

open the door, he dexterously turned aside such blows as he could not readily dodge, gruffly crying out:

"Out o' the way, pard! Eyes open fer Patsy, but let me keef fer this snatch-cat o' cussedness! I'll cyarve ye, Biddy! I'll split ye wide as a salty mack'el ef ye don't—"

"Will ye—will ye, thin?" still viciously flourishing that dangerous weapon to which her strong fingers fitted so readily. "Schnatch-cat, is it? Biddy, Oi am, eh? Patsy's the mahn, d'ye think? Augh! yaugh! come oot o' thot, ye thafe o' the woorld!"

Right merrily steel and iron clinked together for a brief space, then Vince Purkiss, catching the poker against the hilt of his weapon, flung it to one side by pure might of muscle, then stepped closer, giving a short, vicious laugh as he flashed the bright blade so close in front of the virago's eyes that Biddy recoiled involuntarily, giving vent to a low cry that was not all fierce defiance.

Whether or no the athletic tough really meant to flesh his steel upon this, his unexpected adversary, can only be surmised, for just then another actor came upon the scene, and a strong hand closed upon the wrist of the armed right hand, forcing the weapon downward.

"Peace, my sinful friends!" came in the voice of Deacon Ballinger, as he partly swung Vince Purkiss around, himself stepping in between the woman and the tough. "Let dogs delight to bark and—Flag o' truce, my winsome angels!"

Up lifted his free right hand, in a gesture of placation toward Biddy McCarthy, who had recoiled to the side of the rude table on which stood the lighted candle.

Of the trio thus surprised, not the least taken aback was Dan Mixon, to whom had been assigned the position of "case-keeper," while his pard attended to the awakened Amazon.

He had failed to notice the approach of the velvet-footed deacon, who had stood for the space of a single breath at the threshold, viewing that scene, before taking part in the little play.

But now, rallying quickly, the lesser tough spoke up:

"Shell I jolt him, pard? Say the word, an' I'll make his heels break his pesky neck—so I will, now!"

"Don't you say it, Purkiss, my love!" suggested the deacon, not so deeply absorbed in saving another from harm that he had no thought for his own preservation. "I'm here as a holy peacemaker, and so let me pour soothing oils over that troubled sea of—Oh ah!"

He ducked and flung up a warding arm as Biddy McCarthy made an angry gesture with that heavy weapon, his coarse features taking on such a comical twist of mingled fear, anger, warning reproof, that Vince Purkiss broke into a short and grim chuckle.

"Don't! I shorely mean ye well, ma'am!" hastily spluttered the dodging deacon, as the tough jerked his knife-hand free. "I'm here in the holy interests of balmy peace, and—Steady, Purkiss!"

Sharp was the contrast in both voice and looks, for Deacon Ballinger now confronted the armed tough, his own right hand diving out of sight in a side pocket, where the lifting cloth more than hinted at a pistol of some description, all ready for masked business.

"I'm here for peace, and peace I'll have, if I'm forced to fight the whole ranch for it! Steady—as you were, gents! And you, Mrs. McCarthy—lady is as lady acts!"

A brief pause, barely long enough for the two pards to fairly realize that he held the drop, masked though that holding was, then Deacon Ballinger spoke again, in his former tones and accent:

"I'm a holy flag o' truce, which's got a talkin' tongue coupled on to it, fer the good o' law an' order, my gentle friends an' feller-sinners! An' as sech—hear me in decency, I implore thee, sister, an' you, my brethern!"

"An' who may ye be, that takes so mighty much ahn'to yerself, faith? Be what roights d'yeetz intrude ahn a lone wummahn who hasn't anny wan to sthep to

the front—wirra come the bitter black day, chin!" and Biddy McCarthy "braced up" once more, gripping her familiar weapon with fingers which fairly itched for the fray.

"My name is Ballinger, ma'am," answered the deacon, taking off his hat long enough to make a polite bow to the flushed Amazon. "I am sometimes called deacon, because of my peace-loving dis—"

"Divil a care do Oi care av ye war a praste, faith, whin ye come boorstlin' in the dure av an honest gurril, an' throyin' to slaughter the woife av a mon who—"

"Where is he, Mrs. McCarthy?" broke in the deacon, speaking with a greater assumption of authority, even while he was plainly in readiness to duck and dodge to save his pate from that again flourishing weapon.

"Where is who, thin, ye sootherin' scut, ye?"

"Your husband, Patrick McCarthy, of course. Where is he? for—"

"Whoy av coorse? An' whoy is it where he is, thin? Be what roight do yeez intrude ahn me proivacy, thin? An' whoy w'u'dn't Oi be b'atin' in the t'ree heads av yeez, anny-hov, Oi wahnt to be knowin', thin?"

Once more the irate woman made her rush, and once again her heavy poker came in sharp contact with the trusty blade which Purkiss knew so well how to handle.

And once more Biddy McCarthy recoiled as Rankin Ballinger came to the front, his strong fingers gripping that knife-armed hand, forcing it backward and downward, his face stern and his tones sharp as he cried:

"Peace, woman! We wish you no harm, but if you persist in standing in the way of law and justice—Where is your husband, woman?"

"What is it ye want of Patsy, sor?" asked Biddy, in turn, cowed in a goodly measure by that authoritative manner.

"He is suspected of committing murder this very night, and—"

"Who dares to aven hint the loike av that, I wahnt to know?" fiercely burst forth the washerwoman, poker quivering and left arm rising to shake a tightly-clinched fist before that stern face. "Who says me mahn w'u'd sthoop so low as to—Whin was it, thin?"

"This evening, not more than—"

"Ah-ha! 'tis in the divil's own loie Oi'm catchin' yeez, faith!" exultantly cried Mrs. McCarthy, swinging free arm and brandishing poker at the end of its mate, her coarseshod feet spitting the floor in a brief-lived jig of triumph. "He niver did it, foor he c'u'dn't, begorra!"

With a surly snarl, Vince Purkiss wrested his right hand out of the deacon's clutch, even shouldering that worthy rudely to one side as he surged forward a pace, to more squarely confront the amazon.

"Will ye take a squint at this, Biddy McCarthy, then?" hosaid, at the same time lifting a finger to his bruised face, to sweep it in front of his dreadfully blackened eyes.

"Ah-ha! the purthy paintin', thin!" laughed the virago, hands going to hips as she viewed those discolored optics with huge satisfaction. "'Tis coortin' ye'd ought to be marchin' Misther Poorkiss, faith! Av shaapes oyes be precious to lady-love, faix, 'tis thin ye'd be cashtin' her way that ought to be worth tin-double the much, foor thin same is moighty black shaape-oyes, an' scarce accordin', be gonies!"

In grim silence Vince Purkiss waited to the end of this voluble taunt, then spoke in his turn, slowly, like one who means to make each and every word count for its full value.

"Patsy McCarthy gave me these eyes, ma'am. Not more than one short hour gone by, either. And he was running away from the place whar he' butchered a white man, without word or warnin', like a dirty cur!"

Biddy McCarthy laughed again as the tough declared this the handiwork of her husband, but that mirth was short-lived, and even before his slow accusation reached an ending, her voice was lifted up in a wailing cry of bitter grief.

"Wirra—wirra—wirrasthruel! The avil loies that's pourin' across the divilish lips av this dirty scut, an' me poor man stritched out ahn the flat av his blisssed back the whole av this long day!"

"Get out you!" harshly cried Purkiss, his

face flushing hotly as he suspected another cunning pitfall for his feet. "Bald-faced lyin' can't do you no good, Biddy, no more'n it kin save Patsy McCarthy from pulling hemp for shootin'—"

"Steady!" came a warning voice from the little landing just without the open door. "Keep your level, everybody, and—Is it you, Biddy?"

With an abrupt change of tone, the newcomer sprung quickly inside the room, and the washerwoman gave a low cry of intense relief as she recognized a gentleman who had patronized her very liberally of late, and in whom she fancied she surely recognized a friend and protector.

"Oh, Misther Tam! The salve foor sore eyes yeez be, thin! An' ahl av these dirty divils who—'tis me own mahn they say was a murderher!"

"An' I'm still sayin' that same, too!" doggedly growled Purkiss, his armed right hand lifting a bit, as though he felt it best to be on guard.

"An' Patsy loyin' thay're wid his leg ahl br-ruken to splinters!" sobbed Biddy, dropping her poker and stepping back to fling wide another door, revealing a dimly-lighted chamber, where stood a cot-bed, on which lay stretched out the form of a muscular man.

"Will ye luuk at that, now, Misther Tam! Will ye faal av his leg the docthors daubed ahl up wid white murther, thin! Will ye—Oh, Patsy! me mahn—me noble b'ye who'd niver lit the loikes av thim thaves av the woorld insolt the woife av yer buzzon—no, be the Hill o' Howth!"

Ten-Strike Tom quickly stepped to the bedside, bending over the man who was breathing regularly, evidently under the influence of a powerful opiate, since all that disturbance had failed to awaken him.

He saw that one leg was set in plaster, thickly bandaged, and fully convinced that this could not be the unknown assassin, he turned away with a puzzled frown upon his face—to almost run against a cocked and leveled revolver over which glittered two stern eyes!

CHAPTER VII.

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST.

At a slightly earlier hour than that which marked the sanded floor of the Good Luck Saloon with human blood, in Leadville, certain events were transpiring in the city of Denver, not only of interest in themselves, but of especial interest to more than one of the characters already introduced to the reader.

A neatly-dressed young lady, Miss Fanny Barbour by name, was leisurely proceeding in the direction of her boarding-place, after a brief shopping tour in quest of a feminine trifle or two in the business portion of the city.

The night was clear and just sufficiently cool to feel bracing after the customary warmth of the daily sun.

The gas-lamps were lighted at alley-mouth and street corners, while the shop windows were brilliantly illuminated for the double purpose of displaying their wares to the best advantage and attracting the human moth of ye plump pocketbook.

Miss Barbour swung a fairly fat one of her own from daintily gloved fingers as she slackened pace when in front of a wide show-window crowded with toys of all sorts, a half-dreamy smile playing about her full red lips as memory turned backward to her earlier days, when an exhibition akin to this would have seemed a peep through the celestial gates to her childish eyes.

She neither saw nor heard that coarse, bummer-like fellow who glided on tiptoe to her side, then snatched that swinging pocketbook out of her hand, even as he turned to dart around the near corner.

A faint scream broke from her lips as she first shrunk back, then impulsively sprung forward at recognition of her property in that lawless clutch, one hand shooting forth as though to arrest and detain that audacious tramp.

"Button yer lip, cuss ye!" the fellow growled, menacing her with the heavy stick he carried. "Shet trap, or I'll mash yer head!"

"Oh, no, I really wouldn't, now!"

With the words came a sharp stroke that knocked the stolen property from the tramp's hand, drawing a yell of mingled rage and pain from his lips as his barked knuckles swung back to his side, seemingly on a crippled hand.

Until then neither lady nor tramp had taken note of that trim, fashionably garbed figure cutting across the street to the corner they were occupying, and after his first stroke was dealt, 'twas all too late for the pocketbook-snatcher to do more than guard his skull with club.

That neat cane seemed intended for use as well as for ornament, and as the baffled tramp beat a hasty retreat from the scene of his attempted robbery, cane and club rattled together right merrily, with an occasional duller sound which almost surely denoted bruised flesh and aching bones.

Barely long enough to have the semblance of a contest; then the end came as the thieving tramp took to his heels in headlong flight, and, disdaining to chase him further, the gentleman turned back to the corner, reaching it just in time to stoop for the pocketbook which Fanny Barbour had sighted, an instant earlier.

"Allow me, madam," tipping hat as he held forth the recovered purse with neatly-gloved hand. "If I mistake not, this is your property?"

"Oh, thanks—thank you, sir! I never—that dreadful—ugh!"

Fanny shivered, one hand rising to her throat to subdue that strange sensation of suffocation, her form unsteady until a shoulder touched the corner of the building.

The stranger impulsively reached forth a hand as though to lend her support, but stopped just short of touching her person, speaking with a peculiar mixture of anxiety and indignation:

"Did that scoundrel dare—if he has hurt you, madam, I shall run him down and turn him over to the police, if it takes an age! Did he—you are not hurt, then?"

The last query came with an air of relief as Miss Barbour rallied and seemed more like her usual self. She forced a smile as her eyes met his magnetic orbs, and he was answered even before her lips parted.

"I am not hurt at all, sir, but—if I admit being sorely frightened, would it deserve a blush?"

"Surely not, but—you don't wish to have your name figure in the police court reports, of course?"

The stranger made a quick gesture which pointed his meaning, and as the young woman turned her eyes in that direction, she caught sight of a tall figure in police uniform, coming their way as though his interest or his suspicions had been awakened by sight or sound of that short-lived struggle on the corner.

"Pardon me, please," whispered the man, as he caught and drew one of those gloved hands through his arm, gently urging Fanny Barbour around the corner of the building, thus passing from the vision of the policeman, if indeed his eyes had taken note of them. "I know how a lady must shrink from such publicity, and if I may be so honored, I'll see you safely past that peril, at least!"

Fanny said nothing, just then, but her fingers closed gratefully on the arm of the gallant stranger who had so opportunely come to her assistance, and not until they had hurried along for several blocks was another word spoken by either. Then he remarked:

"We have fairly distanced the officer, Miss—ahem!"

He broke off with a real or admirably counterfeited cough, but the maiden flushed a bit, as she took it for a courteous hint, and without stopping to consider whether or no she was acting prudently, stammered:

"Barbour—my name is Fanny Barbour, sir!"

"And mine is Wallace Gilmore, wholly at your service," answered the young man, once more doffing hat and making a polite bow, then giving a low mellow laugh which went far toward removing that feeling of embarrassment. "If hardly formal, at least our introduction is honest, Miss Barbour, and—may our friendship keep pace with the age of our acquaintance!"

The maiden shrunk a bit at this ending, for there certainly seemed more of earnestness than one is wont to put in jest or airy nothing; but if Mr. Gilmore noted this, he gave no sign, resuming their walk as he spoke again:

"I just happened to glimpse the knave creeping toward you, Miss Barbour, and though I could hardly give him credit for making such an audacious attempt to enrich himself at your expense, I turned across the street sooner than I might have done, only for that sight."

"I wish I knew how to thank you, sir," her great blue eyes glancing briefly up to his handsome face, then as quickly veiling their light as his gaze was met.

"In expressing that wish, Miss Barbour, you have already more than thanked me," came the quick assurance, his free hand venturing to just close over the little hand resting on his other arm for an instant, then falling away as its owner added: "After all, what did I do?"

"Quite sufficient to win my gratitude, sir."

"Thanks, in my turn, Miss Barbour! But—permit me, please! I merely barked the knuckles and cracked the crown of a hulking brute who ought to have pulled hemp years ago, judging from his hang-dog visage! And—this is your way, Miss Barbour?"

The young lady had suddenly slackened her pace, partly withdrawing her hand from his arm as Wallace Gilmore was about to cross that intersecting street.

"I turn this way, yes. Pray do not let me take you further out of your way, Mr. Gilmore, for—"

"If your way is mine, though?"

"How can it be, when you were going down-town?"

"Then; but now—listen, Miss Barbour, please! I have a fair young sister of my own, far away toward the rising sun, and if she should fall among thieves, as you came so perilously near doing, only a few minutes ago, would I not wish her an honest escort until safely home again?"

There was no mistaking his real meaning, and once more a soft flush came into the maiden's face as she yielded to the charm of that mellow voice, and made no resistance to the warm hand which gently closed over hers as it rested on that sinewy if not large arm.

"If I thought—"

"Pardon, Miss Barbour, but I could never forgive myself were I to lose sight of you before at your home, in safety. Though I think I read that tramp a pretty fair lesson, there are too many of his sort skulking on the loose, for a lady to pass through these streets wholly unprotected, after dark."

The maiden shivered a bit at the memory thus revived, and if she had doubted before, that hesitation was now gone.

"I have but a short distance further to go, sir, but if you think—if you really wish to—"

"Thanks, Miss Barbour!" gladly catching at that opening. "This is the way, I believe?"

He turned down the street already indicated as the right course, and wisely saying nothing further on that point, once it was won, talked of his own fair young sister, living in the cottage home near the Canada line, in Western New York.

Without precisely saying so, Gilmore lent the inference that Fanny Barbour closely resembled that far-away relative whose praises he sung so cordially, yet so adroitly that it was almost as though his encomiums belonged to this maiden in place of that one!

Yet, through it all, Wallace Gilmore appeared the thorough gentleman, and so well did he manage matters that, short though the remaining distance was, ere that abiding-place was reached, he had made a very favorable impression upon the young lady.

There was a lighted gas-jet over the door of the house in front of which Fanny Barbour had come to a halt, and it required no second glance on Gilmore's part to recognize a boarding-house of the second-rate.

Gently slipping her hand from his arm, Fanny again murmured her thanks for his services, but the young man hardly seemed to hear her words, and certainly did not heed them as they surely deserved.

The gaslight was falling fairly over her face, and with his own countenance wearing a sorely-puzzled look, Wallace Gilmore muttered:

"Strange—so strange! Surely a stranger up to this hour, and yet—where have I seen that face before?"

Fanny Barbour gave a little start, catching her breath as her hands came together in a nervous clasp, face turning almost ghastly pale as she looked with big eyes into his face.

"I never—and yet— Miss Barbour, where have I seen a face so very like, yet unlike yours?"

Almost sternly came that abrupt question, but the maiden did not shrink from it, giving a quick gasp, then impulsively exclaiming:

"Like mine? Oh, if it only might prove to be true!"

She pushed back the curling locks which partially shaded her forehead, turning her face more fully toward the light for closer inspection, yet without the faintest hint of coquetry in it all.

"Look, sir! My face—like my face, you say? There is no mistake? You have really seen a face—whose was it, then?"

Her voice lost something of its wonted music through intense anxiety, but that all the more plainly proved her earnestness, and Wallace Gilmore seemed anything but a carping critic, just then.

He placed a hand on either shoulder the better to view that countenance, neither one of the pair giving thought to what others might infer should any curious eyes be turned their way just then.

"So very like! Such a strong resemblance, yet—am I turned foolish? Surely the face my memory calls up was not—not yours, Miss Barbour! No! The face I mean belonged to a man who—"

"Father—to my poor, lost father!"

Huskily came that choking cry, and tears dimmed the great eyes into which Wallace Gilmore was gazing so keenly yet so perplexedly there under the gaslight.

Fanny Barbour shrunk away, her head drooping, her trim figure shuddering like one caught by an ague-fit.

"Your father?" ejaculated Gilmore, something like a revelation showing itself in his handsome face. "Surely he could not—the man I now have in mind, was not—how could he be your father, though?"

Fanny strove to speak, but at first without much success. Emotion far beyond the common had sorely shaken her nerve, and for a few moments she could say nothing, one hand going out to gain support from the iron railing which guarded the low, broad steps which led up to the front door of the boarding-house.

"My father was—oh, sir! If you can give me any news of my poor lost parent, I'll never forget—I'll thank you with my dying breath!"

"If I only might. But your father—what was his name, then?"

"Anson Barbour, and—"

"What! Anson Barbour your father?" cried Gilmore, swiftly.

CHAPTER VIII.

TIDINGS OF THE LOST ONE.

His face, even more than his words, proclaimed the fact that this was not the first time he had heard of that name, and as she realized as much, Fanny Barbour turned fainter than before, seemingly on the point of sinking to the pavement in a swoon when that strong arm once more flew forth to lend her support.

"Courage, Fanny!" the gentleman said, his own interest powerful enough to excuse his sudden lack of formality. "I will tell you all I know about— But this is hardly the place to talk, is it?"

He flashed an uneasy glance around them, but his words, though hardly such as he would have chosen under less embarrassing circumstances, certainly produced the desired effect, for the maiden "braced up" wonderfully, shrinking slightly from that encircling arm, yet with trembling hand moving to clasp his arm as she panted:

"You must—I must hear—will you step inside, sir?"

"Gladly!" and his clearing countenance certainly bore strong testimony to his per-

fect sincerity so far. "I would have begged the favor of a private interview where we can talk more comfortably than out here on the pave, only— Allow me, please!"

But for once Fanny Barbour evaded his proffered aid, springing up the steps lightly, face flushing with maidenly pride as it tingled under those last words, which Wallace Gilmore hardly meant should produce such an effect.

The door swung open at her touch, and stepping inside, Fanny paused to permit the entrance of her strangely won acquaintance, then closed the barrier behind him, moving swiftly along the wide hallway, opening another door which gave admittance to a dimly-lighted parlor.

"Please wait for me here, Mr. Gilmore," she said with a reserve which she had not exhibited before those unlucky sentences let fall by her escort, a few moments before.

"Gladly, if you are— You will come back, Miss Barbour?" asked the gentleman, as he crossed the threshold, wheeling as the maiden turned away like one beating a retreat. "Surely I have not offended you?"

"No, no, don't think it for a moment, sir! I'll come—wait for me, please! I must hear—Wait for me, sir!"

That period of waiting was not unduly prolonged, for Fanny Barbour felt a feverish eagerness to hear what this handsome stranger had to say concerning the parent for whose return she had longed so vainly; but brief though that interval was, it enabled both girl and man to fairly recover the composure they had lost for the minute.

Although lacking a trifle in color, thanks to her powerful if suppressed emotions, Fanny Barbour looked actually lovely as she came into that dimly-lighted parlor, and hastily rising from the seat he had taken, Wallace greeted her with a low bow and poorly-hidden admiration.

Fanny accepted the seat he proffered her, and at a sign from the young lady he likewise seated himself, then spoke quickly, as though wishing to forestall her questions:

"Will you kindly tell me something about your father, Miss Barbour? How did you lose him? How long since, and after what fashion?"

"I thought you might tell me—"

"Everything that lies in my power, you can depend upon that, Miss Barbour," came his interposition. "Only—I might make my story clearer, if I might first hear yours."

"He is not—he is alive, this one whose face reminded you of mine?" falteringly asked the maiden, eager to learn, yet instinctively shrinking from the possible truth.

"When I saw him last—most surely alive!" was the rather evasive reply; but Fanny took it as it seemed on the surface, and after a slight pause, like one striving to collect and arrange her thoughts, she began her narrative.

In spite of her utmost efforts to hold her emotions under control, the poor child faltered often, and more than once fairly broke down, holding her tear-wet face in hands that trembled visibly.

Through all Wallace Gilmore listened with strong interest, now and then slipping in a pertinent question, or giving a hint which led to still clearer description.

All this consumed no little time, and a literal record would occupy far more space than lies at my disposal just here; still, there came no outside interruption, and through it all the couple had the back parlor to themselves.

Going back to her early girlhood, the better to make her story comprehended by this sympathetic listener, Fanny Barbour spoke of her fair mother's death, all too early for the good of either child or husband.

She told how, terribly shocked by that death, and sorely unsettled in habits by the loss of his wife, Anson Barbour began to lose ground, financially, and how he at length placed his daughter in a private school where she would receive something of home-training as well, paying for her tuition and living expenses far in advance, then turning his face toward the setting sun, vowing to gather another fortune to take the place of the one he had lost.

Word came back from him after a long silence, stating that he was on the point of "striking it rich" in the silver-fields of Colo-

rado, and promising to return to his child as soon as that fortune was won.

Fanny passed on from school to college, for which added expense the absent father sent a draft on an Eastern bank; and with it came the old story: he was surely about to gain that fortune at last!

Finally, now a month or two more than a year before this present day, a soiled and creased letter came to the anxious daughter, and opening it, she found a few hastily-written lines from the hand of her father, stating that fortune had at length met his most extravagant wishes, and that his long-sought fortune had been found at last!

"He had struck it rich, then?" asked Wallace Gilmore, curiously.

"So he declared, and—he added that he was on the point of coming home to his darling—meaning me, sir! He said that I might expect him almost as soon as I received his letter, for— Oh, father! father!"

Her voice broke, and her head bowed to meet her rising hands, sobs making themselves heard, and tears dropping like diamonds to her lap.

Wallace Gilmore half-rose from his seat, but settled back, frowning darkly, his hands clinching tightly, like one who is fighting against inclination or temptation.

Perhaps it was just as well he did not yield, for Fanny rallied as abruptly as she had broken down, and brushing the mist from her eyes with one hand, with the other she produced a folded paper from her pocket, speaking hurriedly as though eager to finish her narrative:

"On the last page of that letter, sir, were a few lines of rude writing which I at first overlooked, stating that the writer of the main letter had been thrown from a bucking broncho on the rough trail, and his right hand and arm so badly sprained that he was unable to write, himself; that he who added these words had found and given Mr. Barbour shelter for the night, and would post the letter as quickly as possible.

"He declared that father was not seriously hurt, but would be able to resume his journey in a day or two at the outside; and then he signed his name—H. K. JONES!"

Fanny Barbour held forth that soiled document, and taking it, Wallace Gilmore pored long and intently over both letter and postscript.

As he looked up, finally, Fanny hurriedly added:

"Father never came home, nor have I heard anything from him, directly or indirectly, since that day! And after vainly striving to gain some positive information through use of the mails and through advertising in the Western papers, I have come out here to Denver, hoping against hope that I may be more successful in a personal quest!"

A pause, a wistful gaze, then the daughter spoke again:

"Even when I was a little child, people used to remark upon my wonderful resemblance in face to my poor father. And when you said— Oh, sir! If you can give me any tidings of my lost parent, pray do not keep me in this horrible suspense any longer!"

Wallace Gilmore drew back in his seat just a trifle as the agitated maiden reached forth her hands in trembling appeal; but he had in a measure invited this ordeal, and now saw no way of evading it, save by actual flight.

"You say your father's name was Anson Barbour, Miss Fanny?"

"Anson Barbour—yes! You surely can tell—"

"Something, yes, but far less than I wish I might be able, for your sake, my poor girl," huskily interposed the man, rising to his feet and holding forth both hands as though for her support.

The maiden turned paler than ever, and her head drooped as her lids closed for the instant. She felt that in these grave and troubled words lay the death-warrant of the parent she had mourned so long and so bitterly.

Wallace Gilmore hardly wished to convey such a conviction, however, and quickly added:

"Don't despair, my dear—Miss Barbour! It may all come right in the end, and your father may be alive and well as ever!"

Fanny looked up, trying pitifully to form

a smile, but making poor work of it. She falteringly uttered.

"You mean it, sir? You are not—oh, sir! Tell me all! Tell me why you said—why you seemed so struck by—surely you have met my poor, lost father, sir?"

"I believe I have met him, yes," gravely answered the young man, taking both of her hands in his, drawing them almost against his breast in his sudden ardor. "And now—can you hear what I have to say, Miss Fanny?"

"Yes—anything is better than this killing suspense! You say—pray tell me all—everything, sir!"

A brief pause, then Wallace Gilmore spoke again:

"I was in Leadville, little more than one year ago, when I saw the man whose face so strangely resembles yours: so like, yet with such a peculiar difference that—"

"My father! And he was—oh, sir, have pity! Go on—go on!"

"He had his right hand bandaged, and his right arm supported by a sling, as though both had been injured. That was just after a hard fight between road-agents and a stage load of miners, so I asked the name of the stranger, who was just entering a coach, bound for Denver.

"Some person mentioned his name—Anson Barbour," he slowly added.

"My father! And for Denver? He was coming here, to this city?"

"Yes. He was getting into the Denver stage, and I know there was no trouble with the road-agents that week, so he surely must have reached this place in safety."

"Then—where is he now? Where did he go from here? Why did he never write to me? Why has he not—oh, merciful heavens! My father—my poor lost father!"

Freeing her hands, Fanny sunk back into her chair, covering face with hands and sobbing as if her heart would surely break.

For a few moments Wallace Gilmore stood gazing down upon her bowed form, then he abruptly exclaimed:

"He shall be found, living or dead—I swear it, Fanny! I'll fall to work as I've never toiled in all my life before, and I'll never relax my efforts until this mystery is solved and your father found!"

As though he feared to let his feelings carry him too far just then, Gilmore snatched up his hat and beat a hasty retreat, leaving the house without heeding the maiden's agitated call after him!

CHAPTER IX.

HOW BIDDY MCCARTHY HELD THE FORT.

THAT pair of eyes belonged to Vincent Purkiss, and his was the hand which gripped revolver-butt, and his the gun which was thrust into the very face of Ten-Strike Tom after such a business-like fashion.

"Hold yer level, pardner, or I'll jolt ye clean over the Great Divide!" came in a menacing growl from his parting lips as eyes met eyes.

Not often was the King-Pin Sport caught wholly off his guard, but this was one of these rare exceptions.

His own hands swung free of his tools, while the burly tough had only to contract his forefinger the fraction of an inch for that pointed hammer to fall, and then—death!

No man living could more thoroughly understand all this than Ten-Strike Tom, but he never flinched an atom, ducked nor dodged, made no effort to ward or to strike, gazing squarely into those bloodshot optics, with a coldly contemptuous smile dawning in his handsome face.

"What's the matter with you, Purkiss?" he asked, evenly, tones as clear and steady as though merely passing the time of day with the best of friends.

"It's what'll be the matter with you, ef you begin fer to kick when—"

"Your're the burro's bigger brother, Vince, not I. Why should I kick, unless at catching myself in such low-down company? Put up that gun, you crazy idiot!"

"Don't curry him too mighty brash, brother!" croaked the deacon from his position of safety back of that burly figure. "An' you, gentle son, tetch lightly when ye rake over the sore places!"

"I said— Put up that gun, Vince Purkiss!"

"Putt up nothin', ontel— You cain't play no roots onto the like o' us, Tom Gay-worthy, an' ye'll only lose yer ruff by tryin' of it on!"

"I never did take you for a Solomon, Purkiss, but now I know you for Jack Donkey's own son! What are you trying to get through you, anyway?"

"It's a chunk o' lead you'll git through ye, Ten-Strike, ef ye don't take the hint an' open the road fer them as hain't tryin' to hide the dirty dog as bloody-murdered yen' cove who—"

"Av it's maanin' me Patsy, mahn, divil roide me bareback up hill an' down betwuxt day an' day av Oi don't— L'ave me at him, sor! Jist wance will ye l'ave me at him, be-gorra!"

"Peace, Biddy, my darlint!" soothed the King-Pin Sport, turning head for a brief glance back at the angry amazon, looking as cool himself as though that ugly muzzle was not nearly brushing his face. "I'll turn him over to you to use as fry, boil, roast or fricassee, just as soon as I've made out whether he's turned crazy, or was merely born that way."

Eyes coming back to that sullen, bruised countenance, the King-Pin Sport coldly added:

"If you're going to shoot, why don't you get a hustle on, Purkiss?"

"That's all right, Sport, an' shoot 'll come plenty soon ef ye don't walk a chalk fur'nough to give us all a show at Patsy, yender—ef it is Patsy, that's sayin'!"

"Faith, thin, an' it's Patsy enoogh ye'd be t'inkin' him av me poor mahn had two ligs av his own foor sthandin' ahnto, thin!"

"It's seein' fer our own selves, Ten-Strike, an' that's the full length of our wantin'," a little more placably spoke the tough, yet still holding the drop.

"Shoot me out of your road if it likes ye, Purkiss, but I'll never give way before bald-headed threats," coldly declared the Sport. "Now, either shoot or put up your gun! Quick—or somebody'll get hurt!"

Deacon Ballinger seemed to think matters had gone far enough along that line, for he stepped closer to the sullen tough, speaking gravely:

"Give a inch to win a couple, my son! The gent isn't really bent on shieldin' a possible criminal, only you roughed him too mighty harsh!"

"Ef he hain't tryin' to help Patsy trick us all, why don't he step outside an' let us hev a fa'r squint at the dog-gun critter, then?"

"I told you McCarthy was lying in a stupor, after having broken his leg. You can see for yourself, Purkiss," with a slight nod toward the cot-bed and its motionless occupant.

"That's jest what we want: seein' for our own selves! Make room, Ten-Strike, or—shell I make it, with this?"

That ugly muzzle actually touched the face of the King-Pin Sport, but Gayworthy never showed sign of flinching, his voice coldly even as he once more repeated:

"Put up that gun, Vincent Purkiss, or I'll make y'ur heels break your fool' neck!"

For the space of a single breath his life wavered in the scale, but then his own nerve won stepping back a pace, the tough growlingly spoke:

"All right, Sport! Up the gun goes! An' now—"

"And now you're acting something like a white man, I'll meet you on the same level, Purkiss," declared Gayworthy, with an entire change of tone and demeanor. "Behave yourselves decently, and I reckon there's no serious objection to your viewing our mutual friend, Patsy. Is there, though, Mrs. McCarthy?"

But Vincent Purkiss was far too eager to satisfy his savage doubts for waiting longer now that main obstacle was removed from his path, and brushing past the King-Pin Sport, he gained the side of the bed, stooping so as to win a fairer view of that partly-hidden face.

So far there was no deception: this was Patsy McCarthy, safe enough, though his face looked paler than usual, and as though he had passed through a severe if brief siege of illness.

"Look up, dug-gun ye!" viciously cried the tough, one hand dropping heavily on that

broad shoulder and giving the injured man a rude shake. "Ef you're playin' roots on—I knowed it!"

Either that rough handling, or else the sounds of his enemy's hated voice, one or both together, broke the spell of that opiate, for Patsy McCarthy opened his heavy lids, and after a dazed stare of a second or two, recognized the tough with a hoarse cry of angry rancor.

Vince Purkiss started back a bit, even as the crippled Irishman began to lift himself under the light cover, shaping the words:

"Ab-ha! ye nahsty schum av the woorld, ye! Biddy—Biddy!"

"Patsy, me good mahn!"

"T'row 'im oot o' thot, will ye? Give me me sthick, thin, an' Oi'll be afther— Ah-ha! T'row the dirt oot o' thot, Biddy!"

The cripple found it impossible to rise further, but Biddy was coming to the front with a whoop and a yell, looking big as a mountain, and fierce enough for two.

"Insoolt me hilpliss mahn, will ye? T'row dirt ahl over the gintlemahn that does ye proud be hatin' av yeez, hey? Wait ahntil Oi b'ate the hollow hid av ye loike a drum that's— Ow-wow!"

Vince Purkiss recoiled before that furious onset, ducking and dodging from that flourishing poker, right arm going up to save his threatened skull, too busily occupied thus to take note of whether he was backing, until he came against the low sill of the dormer window.

Then, with a wild howl of vindictive joy, Biddy McCarthy flung her huge bulk forward, dropping poker to the more effectively use her hands, striking against the tough with such force as to fairly drive him backward through the window, splintering the glass and bursting the rickety sash from its frail fastenings.

Vince Purkiss gave a sharp yell of blended rage and fear, then vanished from view of his startled friends, who had been taken so completely by surprise that neither one had lifted hand or foot to join in.

"Steady, both!" sternly commanded Ten-Strike Tom as his guns came forth from their customary hiding-places, muzzles turned up on the deacon and Dan Mixon.

"Pard—ef Vince 's ketched his death—"

"If he has, 'twas by his own invitation," sternly cut in the Sport with the drop. "Go look to him, if you like, but not through this channel, if you please, gents!"

Thinking solely of his friend, Mixon wheeled and rushed toward the outside flight of stairs, while Deacon Ballinger recoiled from those menacing muzzles, an open hand lifting with palm to the front as a token of peace.

"Don't shoot—" he began, but before he could proceed further, a wild "hurroo" burst from the crippled Irishman over the utter downfall of his hated enemy and rival among toughs of Denver.

Lifting himself to a sitting posture, heedless of pain or of the injury he might be doing to his broken leg, he cried in fierce joy:

"More power to yer illbow, Biddy, me darlint! Give me the goon! The shoot-goon, Biddy! Quick, ye divil, ye! The goon, so Oi kin blow ahl yan' dirty dirt oot av the dure loike—wait, ye divils—wait!"

But his fierce invitation was unheeded, unless by quickening the steps of those now retreating men, one growling, the other laughing as though he found it all the best of sport.

For obedient Biddy was reaching up for the dusty and rusty musket which hung from twin hooks against the chamber wall, and Patsy was not too badly crippled for pulling trigger when he had pointed the muzzle in the correct direction.

As the deacon had won the start, so he gained *terra firma* first, but Ten-Strike Tom was close upon his heels, and they were side by side as they ran around the building to see what fate had befallen Vince Purkiss.

They found Dan Mixon with his worsted pard, who was beginning to rally the senses which had been pretty well knocked out of him by that awkward fall.

Though he still lay in a heap, pretty much as he had fallen, even so soon it was fairly certain no bones had been broken, and his fears on that score being dissipated, Ten-

Strike Tom made no pretense at sympathy which he did not feel for the fellow.

"He brought it all on himself, and really got off cheaper than he deserved. If he tries the same thing over, the hangman'll never earn wages on his account!"

"Vince'll play even if it takes a leg off!"

"It'll take his roof off, more likely," bluntly asserted the Sport. "If he's all fool to-night, that's no sign the rest of you need join in to make triplets of it, is there?"

"We cain't jump the game an' give pard the dirty shake, kin we?"

"I'm not advising you to shake him. Just the contrary: stick to Vince, and take him home before he can fairly realize what's happened. Fill him up with whisky, if you can't find a cheaper substitute, but don't let him out on the loose again until his head's cleared up a good bit better than it is right now. *Sibs?*"

Ten-Strike Tom spoke bluntly enough, and hardly in his wonted suave tones, but he made his meaning sufficiently clear for their comprehension, and that covered the main point.

Without waiting to see how or whether his advice was acted upon, Gayworthy turned away, giving but a passing glance at the shattered dormer window up yonder.

"Biddy can hold the fort, safely enough, even without the aid of her good man, Patsy!" was his grim reflection as he quickened his steps, turning the first corner that would enable him to head more directly for the Good Luck Saloon.

His brain was busy with more important thoughts now, and instinct alone kept him headed by the most direct route for that destination. He was pondering over that tragic death, that mysterious slayer, that blood-stained scrap of paper on which were certain broken words that—

Then dark shapes leaped from ambush and closed with the Sport!

CHAPTER X.

TEN-STRIKE TOM FALLS AMONG THIEVES.

NOT the faintest sound betrayed that ambushade until it was ready for springing, and even then the King-Pin Sport knew naught of the impending peril until he actually felt it.

Something caught both of his legs just below the knees, giving a sharp jerk backward, just as some other thing struck him squarely between the shoulders, driving his trunk forward.

There could be but one result: Ten-Strike Tom pitched forward on his face, with barely time enough to protect that important portion of his anatomy by jerking his head back sharply: for his arms were pinned to his side by a stout rope which likewise encircled his body.

A heavy weight dropped upon the small of his back—that rope was drawn still more tightly—a pair of hot hands closed upon his throat, checking the shout that involuntarily rose therein.

Working in perfect concert, just as though they had often practiced together after this very fashion, those two silent schemers consumed hardly more than a single minute in completing their capture, and that without granting the victim even the ghost of a chance to struggle or to use a weapon.

Ten-Strike Tom would never have believed such a feat possible with any less conclusive evidence; and yet, he was not so greatly in fault.

There was nothing whatever to make him suspect danger of this description before it burst upon him: and then the best man living could have done no more than he did: yield to the inevitable.

That awkward fall had driven the breath out of his lungs, partly stunning him, while those sharp knees boring into his back nearly paralyzed his limbs through affecting the spine.

A heavy muffler was wrapped about his face and head, the sweaty odor of which added no little to that sense of suffocation, and a stout thong drew it closely around his neck, thus guarding against its dropping off, and rendering useless any efforts he might make to loosen the nauseating folds.

Not until then, when his head was hooded, his arms securely bound behind his back, his person so utterly hampered that fight or flight was equally out of the question, did Thomas

Gayworthy hear so much as word or exclamation from either of his assailants.

"Fetch the donk', pardner!" uttered a husky voice which the Sport failed to recognize through that muffler. "We want to hike out o' this in a holy hurry, or some o' them cussed— Fetch up the donk', will ye!"

Ten-Strike heard another sound which might have been an answer, although he could not distinguish a word; and then came a brief bray, cut short as by human hands deftly grasping the muzzle.

"Cram yer louse-cage in his trap ef he tries ary other chune, pardner!" came that initial voice as the sound of shuffling hoofs were distinguished by the captured Sport. "Now—hyste 'im up—so fashion!"

Strong hands closed upon the prisoner, body and legs, lifting him clear of the ground and placing him astride a far from comfortable saddle borne by a burro.

"Stiddy, now, critter! Play ye was a stick-tight or a devil's pitchfork fer a brace o' shakes. Ef ye take a tum'le—waal, the ground'll ketch ye, but I'd rather 'twas you then me gittin' the rocky bumps!"

At this the burro was set in motion, and taking advantage of that fact, which might conceal his efforts from the eyes of his captors, Ten-Strike Tom tested his bonds severely if swiftly.

They did not yield even the fraction of an inch, and while there was no hindering clutch fastened upon his person, Gayworthy knew his attempt to break away had not passed unnoticed.

A coarse chuckle greeted his ears, and that husky voice made itself heard once more:

"Whar's the use, critter? Reckon gents o' our caliber'd go fer to make sech a pesky bungle of a 'portant job like this yer'? An' ef you're wise es ye be good-lookin', Tommy, you'll jest take 'er easy ontel we gits a good ready fer to— What's up, pardner?"

"Cork 'er hup, blawst ye, mate! W'y will ye keep hon talkin' w'ile talkin's no good? Cork 'er hup, then!"

Ten-Strike Tom gave an involuntary start as he caught this reproof, given by one who could hardly be mistaken for another, so long as his accent was so marked.

"That's all right, pardner, and it's all right-er, Tommy!" a hand gripping an arm by way of lending additional emphasis to his speech. "You've done ketched on, 'count of pardner, hyar, never l'arnin' to talk like a white gent. But what's the hods? We're gwine fer to do a heap-sight o' chin chin afore we take ye in out o' the wet fer good!"

Still, the reproof had some effect, since the pace of the burro was hastened, and nearly half an hour passed by without another word being spoken by either of the two kidnappers.

At the end of this period, when Ten-Strike Tom knew from the movements of his charger that they had entered the hills out of Leadville, although he could only dimly guess at the direction they had taken on leaving town, a halt was called.

Leaving their captive seated on the patient burro, the two knaves drew apart far enough to prevent Ten-Strike Tom from catching any of their words.

The Sport, half-suspecting that this was but a ruse to give him another temptation to break away, sat motionless in his saddle.

That first effort had convinced him any escape without help from other hands was an impossibility while matters remained as they now were, and he was cool enough to bide his time.

Five minutes later, their private talk ended, his captors came back to lift him out of the saddle, dumping him unceremoniously on the ground where his back touched a rough-barked tree.

"Ef ye cain't take it easy, take it ez easy ez ye kin, critter!" one of his abductors spoke, huskily. "We hain't gwine to butcher ye—not fu'st-off, anyway! Mebbe not at all, ef you kin listen to reason, like—"

"Come hoff, you bag hof windy gas!" harshly cut in he of the second voice. "Haren't ye got hany better work hon 'and, then? Ham h! to do hit hall, hand you nothink, hat hall?"

"Oh, keep yer clo'es on, Irish, or—"

"Oo's Hirish? Call me hout hof me right name hag'in, ye bloomink Yankee, hand h'll—"

"Who's a Yankee, you blame' fool? Who's a—ugh! quit yer nonsense, now, an' grab bresh fer a glimmer, British!"

If Ten-Strike Tom had held any doubts as to just whose hands he had fallen into, those doubts vanished now as he caught these hot and spicy sentences passed by those twain.

Still, it could hardly be said that he was set more at ease in mind by that discovery. He was pretty well assured that both fat and lean claimant of the name in which he felt such a strong interest, were rank cowards, but did that make them any the less dangerous to an enemy when they had him foul?

Leaning back against the tree, he moved his pinioned arms up and down, striving to loosen those thongs, and a little thrill of fierce delight ran through him as he succeeded far beyond his most sanguine expectations.

But before he could entirely succeed, sounds came through that disgusting muffler which warned him to cease his efforts for the time being, and not long after the dim glow of a growing fire made its way through to his eyes.

"That's all right, pardner, an' now I'll take— Stiddy by jerks, Tommy, boy!"

Hands fumbled at that muffler, then drew it away, leaving Ten-Strike Tom to draw in a long and grateful breath of pure air as his eyes winked and blinked at the ruddy glow of the fire directly in front of his present station.

Half-blinded though he was by this abrupt transition from darkness to light, Gayworthy at once recognized the gangling figure of Hamilton King Jones in the fellow feeding the fire, then turned eyes toward the person who had just removed his hood-wink.

That was Henry Kane Jones, as a matter of course, but the King-Pin Sport fairly gagged as he saw those thick, stumpy arms extended, holding up for its owner's inspection that same muffler; nothing else than the flannel shirt "Harry-cane" Jones had worn when he made his first appearance on the Good Luck stage!

Having viewed that useful if not ornamental article of apparel, the corpulent claimant put it on, and then made a sharp gesture toward the other knave, both men drawing in front of the prisoner as though on inspection.

"Well, what next, you Siamese Twins?" coolly asked Gayworthy, after glancing up and down their ludicrously contrasting shapes.

"What next?" exploded the fat man, his face flushing redder than ever. "Business—an' business kivered over with red pepper, too! Who be I, anyway?"

"A sad relic of the Kilkenny cat war, I'd put it at a rough guess. You're too awfully fat to be drawn through a knot-hole, but you do look something like that, for a scandalous fact!"

The fat claimant pulled forth one of the posters with which Leadville was liberally dotted over, pointing to the heading, then to the name in bold-face type, afterward smiting his swelling bosom in fierce excitement.

"What is that? Which is them? Whar be I at, then? Skin yer peepers, dug-gun ye fer a howlin' fraud out o' jail! Squint 'em keen right at the bunch o' all this yer! What does she say?"

Again pointing his sentences with stumpy forefinger, he added:

"Reward! H. K. Jones! Which ef he does, 'll hear somethin' to his 'vantage! Don't she run that-a-way, dug-gun ye, critter?"

"Well, what of it, Skinny-lean?"

"Oh, will ye lis'en to him, once! What of it? This is what of it, billy-be-dug-gun to ye, critter!"

"Look at me mousetackle!" with fingers touching his ragged and curtailed mustaches, which had fared but poorly during that hot if brief scramble with the tall claimant. "View me nose—red-hot an' tenderer to tetch then an old maid's funny bone! Gaze upon me face: painted all over in spots, an' lines, an' dashes, an' daubs!"

Flinging out his arms, Henry Kane dramatically cried anew:

"Be this that sort o' reward? Does all them show so dug-gun much to my 'vantage? I'm that same H. K. Jones, an' ye jest knows

it, too, but—hev I got my pay fer bein' that same, I'm axin' ye, critter?"

"Me, too!" shrilly cut in Hamilton King, slowly turning himself on his heels as on a double pivot. "Shirt-tore! Gallus bu'sted! Nose knocked hall crooked! Money hout hof pocket, hand not ha bloomink shiner to show hon t'other side hof the ledger!"

"Is all them—not fergittin' three black eyes atwixt the pair of us—is all them pay? Is all them big reward? Hey? Sa-ay, you?"

Ten-Strike Tom glanced coolly from face to face, then spoke:

"If it's pay you're howling about, my bul-lies, just cast off these bonds, and I'll agree to pay you off, both at the same time!"

Bold enough, and possibly bolder than wise, under the circumstances, for the ruffians thus insolently defied glanced at each other, then with still grimmer looks his way, each jerked forth a revolver and thrust muzzle forward to nearly touch his face, the fat knave crying harshly:

"Why not lift yer ruff, cully, an' pay our own selves?"

CHAPTER XI.

TEN-STRIKE TOM TURNS THE TRICK.

THAT began to look very much like sober business, but even now the wonderful nerve of the King-Pin Sport did not desert him, and though his head was free to move, he made no attempt to put his brain out of range, unflinchingly meeting those savage looks while retorting:

"Because I'm a man, and you both are low-down curs!"

"Stiddy, ye lippy critter!"

"h'l'll make ye heat them words hif hit 'angs me!"

"And hang you it will, as any one less than a natural born idiot would know without telling," coolly retorted the prisoner, his black eyes gaining a reddish luster as they fixed more particularly upon that face.

"Bah!" as Hamilton King shrunk back a pace, as though intimidated by the look. "I said cur, but I now stand ready to apologize to the dog!"

The revolver gripped by the corpulent claimant grew unsteady at that, and a half-smothered snort told how ready Henry Kane was to appreciate a cut at his whilom rival.

Ten-Strike Tom turned eyes and tongue that way, both keen as briars and each seemingly tipped with venom.

"Surely you're not impudent enough to take the title of either dog or cur to yourself? There'd be a shade more reason in it if I had said skunk, but even then— Well, a skunk does take a bath, occasionally!"

Henry Kane gave another snort, but one of very different nature at this base insinuation.

His gun came back until the cold metal fairly rubbed against the nose of the hampered Sport, and he cast a glance toward the taller knave as his deep tones came rumblingly forth:

"Shell I, pardner? Shell I let blizzer an' hyste the ruff o' his cabeza, Hupper Krust?"

A brief pause, during which the tall claimant seemed inwardly debating the advisability of ending the question then and there; but his response leaned to the other side when it did come.

"h'l don't think h'l would, 'Arrycane, just now," slowly. "Pay first, glory hafterward—hey?"

"We kin go through his wardrobe an'—"

"W'ich hit cawn't git haway w'ile 'ee stays 'ere, cawn hit, though?" shrewdly argued the cockney. "Time henough to save the tallow hafter we've taken 'is 'ide, don't ye know?"

Henry Kane drew a tremendous breath at this, shaking his head slowly like one reluctantly convinced by shrewder arguments against his inclinations.

"Good Lawd! Ef a critter could only eat an' hev it both! Ef I was only jest— All right, pardner!"

He drew back his revolver, thrusting it through his wide belt, then moving slowly aside with the tall claimant.

Gayworthy watched them with slightly curling lip, for, more than ever was he convinced that all this was but part of a pre-arranged farce which yonder knaves calculated he would mistake for a genuine tragedy, and so pay a heavier price for his life and liberty.

"I'd drive 'em both with a limbertwig, if my hands were free!" he muttered, below his breath, keeping close watch upon their movements while once more striving to slip his hands up through that loosened cord. "If they only knew it, I'm— Steady, boy!"

If the brace of knaves had drawn aside for the purpose of consultation, or of fully deciding on the proper line to follow, their views were made to match with remarkable easiness, for they turned back once more, each bruised face wearing a stern scowl as their darkened eyes came into line with that cold, composed countenance.

Henry Kane waddled a bit to the fore, and pausing in front of the hampered Sport, clapped hands on hips after his favorite fashion, swelling his chest, pouting his fat cheeks until his blackened eyes were but little more than a memory, then finally let out breath and words at the same time.

"This means clean business, critter, an' ye want to know jest that afore we git 'long ary furdur; clean business, with a bumbly-bee in the red-hot tail of it, too!"

"Get down to business, then, Skinny-lean, but don't talk of anything clean in connection with yourself, for consistency's sake!"

"Which adds 'nother case to the sum-total! Which hain't gwine fer to make our jedgment none the easier onto ye, critter! Jokin's good, when it is good, but when ye've got to pay fer it—but never mind that!"

"Chalk line, 'Arrycane!" shrilly warned his fellow-sinner.

"Hemp-line, rather!" amended the irrepressible Sport, turning his head against his right shoulder, then giving a peculiar cluck with tongue in cheek, the more keenly to point his meaning.

But now the corpulent claimant seemed armed against his hints and insinuations, merely nodding his head in grim warning as he spoke:

"'Nough's bin said fer to show ye how sech things cost, critter, an' now ye're keepin' case fer yer own game. Ez fur we-'uns—lis'en:

"We've done hed a power o' trouble over this yer' monkey business, an' now we're wantin' of a heap o' pay, to match a'cordin'; see?"

"If seeing was all, I'd be comparatively happy; but when it comes to smelling—can't you shift to leeward a bit, Sweet Violets?"

"Hupper Krust" Jones broke forth in a squealing laugh at this hint, and "Harry-cane" Jones turned an angry glare in his direction, rumbling forth the warning:

"Cork 'er hup, you! Cork 'er hup, hor h'l'll jump down that red lane o' yours an' turn ye wrong side out'ards! Who's runnin' this job, anyway, I'd like fer to ask ye, critter?"

"hAll right, me covey!" shrilled his rival, with a yielding wave of a dirty paw. "h'l'm squelshed! h'l'm sayin' nothink hat hall, ye know!"

"Then don't try to. An' you, dug-gun ye fer a clickety-clack ole maid! I'm markin' it all down fer futur' settlement, an' when you git done payin' all bills I reckon you'll sort o' wish ye hedn't bin soee-tarnally smart; ye bet I jest do, now!"

"Why, Skinny-lean, you talk as though you really meant it all!"

"Mebbe ye think I don't mean it all? Mebbe you don't reckon— Ef thar was more time fer wastin', I'd ax no better fun then to break the turrible shock unto ye little be jerks, an' a chunk at a time! But ez she stan's—open them two years of ye, critter!"

"You advertised fer H. K. Jones. You putt it down in prent plenty big 'nough fer arybody with eyes to see, that you'd pay big money fer news o' that same H. K. Jones, an' more a'cordin' ef H. K. Jones was to shove him own self to the front, 'live an' ready fer kickin'."

"Now, didn't ye do jest them, critter?"

"What's that to you, you traveling fraud?"

"A heap to me, an' 'nother heap o' pritty much the same size to him, ez ye kin see right yender-ways," with a curt nod of his head toward Hamilton King. "We're both H. K. Jones. We both picked up our hoofs an' come all the lonesome ways to Leadville, hopin' to hit pay-rock when we ketched up

with the p'izen critter as struck off them posters.

"We got thar. We axed our right way ontel we found the Good Luck S'loon, whar all sech infornation was to drap in. We see a cuss who owned up he made them offers, an'—what did we git back?"

Stumpy hands flew up to point out his injuries, just as they had done before, and at the same time "Hupper Krust" Jones began his slow pivot-act to complete that inventory of damages.

"All these! An' when we ax fer pay—"

"You shall have full payment!"

So cried Ten-Strike Tom, and in the same breath he began to measure out that reward to suit—himself, if not the knavish claimants!

As though hurled bodily out of a powerful catapult, the King-Pin Sport shot forward, his bending head striking Harrycane Jones full in his fat paunch, doubling him up with an explosive grunt and knocking him back against the tall rascal, whose legs gave way and let them both down in a tangled, squirming, heaving heap!

Ten-Strike Tom sprung to his feet, casting aside the rope which he had worked loose from his arms by aid of the tree-trunk against which his back had been braced.

Hamilton King was scrambling to his feet when a fist caught him under the chin, making his jaws clash together like a pair of dry bones, head flying back and body following, with long limbs wildly flourishing the while.

Just in time, Ten-Strike Tom flung forth a sure foot to kick the revolver out of the fat man's grip, then closed in with fists playing a vicious tune upon that puffy visage, each stroke making its mark plain enough for all men to read that looked.

It was a right merry circus while it lasted, but the trick was so easy turned that the King-Pin Sport grew disgusted ere long, and, taking possession of the pistols with which the unsavory pair had menaced his brains not so very long before, he held them both level while saying:

"Beg, you arrant curs! Apologize for daring to lay paws upon a gentleman! Beg, or croak!"

"Don't shoot, for—"

"Down on your knees and chew dirt, both of ye!" sternly commanded their master for the time being. "Down, I say! Lick dust, or I'll disgrace my record by blowing you both over the range!"

Whether he meant all he said is not so certain, but Ten-Strike Tom spoke as though he was in deadly earnest, and, fearing the very worst, the two rascals obeyed: literally, too!

Down on their knees, lowering heads until their faces touched the ground, lapping dirt while those menacing muzzles kept them covered!

"Good enough, so far, and now—flatten out, dogs!"

No sooner said than done, and discarding those confiscated weapons for the time being, Ten-Strike Tom caught up the rope which had played an important part in his own capture, cutting it in two, then using the pieces to bind their hands securely behind their backs.

The burro which had carried the King-Pin Sport to that secluded spot was patiently dozing where left by the twin frauds, and, taking a long lariat, or trail-rope, from where it hung in a coil at the saddle-bow, Gayworthy quickly rove a slip-knot at either end, and then fitted a noose snugly about the neck of each prisoner as they lay on the ground, neither daring to stir until permission was given them.

"Get up, you whelps!" their master said, shaking the doubled rope as a further hint. "Up, and—steady!"

He fastened the trail-rope to the pommel, then easily swung one leg over the back of the meek-eyed donkey, grimly adding:

"Hang back or lie down if it suits your tastes better, whelps! I'm going back to town, and you—get a move on, Neddy!"

Apparently paying no further attention to the luckless speculators who were compelled to follow nimbly on penalty of strangulation, Tom Gayworthy headed for lower ground, knowing that the city must lie in that direc-

tion, although, as yet, he had but a vague notion of his present whereabouts.

The aptness of his reasoning was quickly made evident, for the odd train had covered less than quarter of a mile, when those keen eyes caught a glimpse of so many twinkling lights ahead that he could no longer doubt where Leadville lay.

Maliciously urging the burro to his best paces, Ten-Strike Tom kept on without heeding those groans, puffings, lamentations and prayers for mercy, until at the edge of town. Then he alighted, saying:

"Would you rather be shot now, or lynched by the town, whelps?"

CHAPTER XII.

TEN-STRIKE TOM DOUBLY SURPRISED.

THEIR nerve entirely wasted, both knaves begged for mercy most sincerely, and though Ten-Strike Tom made no immediate concession, it need hardly be said that he had no real intention of punishing the rascals with such severity.

"Well, I'll not waste good cartridges on such worthless game," he said, presently, pushing the two men closer to the heels of the burro, then taking up some of the slack in the trail-rope thus obtained, and with it forming a double-hitch around the donkey's tail, close up.

"Keep your ups buttoned, now, my whelps, unless you want to call out all the hoodlums of Leadville. If they should see two necks, with as many nooses ready fitted—up a tree you'd surely go!"

Leading the burro, Ten-Strike Tom moved onward once more, avoiding such streets as were more numerous lighted up, yet striking for a populous portion of the town when daylight reigned.

When satisfied with the position won, he called a halt, securely hitching the burro to a post, then passing all over in final inspection before addressing those crestfallen knaves:

"You can wait here in silence, whelps, until something turns up, or, if you reckon that will bring sweeter good luck, just lift your voices in a melancholy howl for aid and comfort in distress!"

"Maybe I'll drop around this way in the morning, to see how you've been enjoying yourselves, but don't look for me until you see me coming. Now—pleasant dreams, my blessed twins!"

Without further look at or care for the discomfited rascals, Ten-Strike Tom turned away, striding briskly along through the night, making no halt until he had gained the hotel where he had engaged a room for the term of his stay in Leadville.

Passing through the office and up to his chamber without speaking or being spoken to, the King-Pin Sport sunk down on the edge of his narrow bed, hands supporting chin as he stared with unseeing eyes at his dimly burning lamp.

Thus for a few minutes, then rousing with a start, giving himself a shake like one striving to cast off unwelcome thoughts before seeking repose under the blankets.

If this was his hope, Thomas Gayworthy made anything but a success of it, for he lay for at least an hour there in the dark, running over in his too busy brain the events of the night; the coming of those two claimants, each one vowing that he had the sole right to the name of H. K. Jones; the squabble which followed, cut short by the reeling entrance of the bleeding stranger; his vain hunt for the slayer, his search of that stiffening corpse, and the finding of that bit of soiled paper, where water and blood combined had obliterated nearly everything.

He saw again these incomplete words: "—son Bar—" and mentally wondered if they stood for "Anson Barbour," or if those other two initials had aught to do with the living (or dead) H. K. Jones?

Finally, failing to solve the perplexing puzzle to anything like his own satisfaction, Thomas Gayworthy resolutely banished all such annoying thoughts, and presently fell into a sound and healthy slumber.

Although he had lost the biggest portion of the night, so far as sleep was concerned, Ten-Strike Tom was afoot bright and early in the morning, and only pausing in night attire long enough to give that red-dyed scrap of paper a searching inspection in

faint hopes of making some more complete discovery by the light of day, he clothed himself and took a precautionary look at his pistols before leaving his chamber.

"Begins to look as though this search for a missing man was going to merge into something heap more exciting," he grimly muttered to himself while thus engaged. "Was that poor fellow H. K. Jones, or was it H. K. Jones who riddled him with lead?"

That was one of the fresh points which had sprung up so unexpectedly in the path he had entered purely for friendship's sake, and Ten-Strike Tom felt that he would be making an important point in the game he was playing if he could satisfactorily solve that doubt.

"From the few words he let fall before crossing the range, either one might be correct: now—how to find out, for dead sure?"

It was yet too early for regular breakfast at the hotel, and the King-Pin Sport left that building, turning down Harrison avenue and making the best of his way to a small but fairly neat restaurant, or chop-house, where he had in times gone by more than once secured a quickly-served broil, such as he now ordered.

While waiting to be served, as well as serving his appetite, Gayworthy let his brain work busily on, and when through with his steak, he had at least a portion of his programme marked out for the morning.

Walking at his best pace, it did not take very long to carry the handsome Sport over the distance lying between the chop-house and the establishment run by Pop-eyed Moses.

There was little stir and no bustle at all visible about that building when those keen eyes first caught sight of the Good Luck Saloon, but Ten-Strike Tom had discounted this in advance.

It would take rather more than one "corpse for breakfast" to materially disturb the mining-camp routine, and, after all, Leadville was but little more than that, though on so large a scale.

Thomas Gayworthy slackened pace as his foremost foot struck the Good Luck threshold, for his keen glance told him that no human body cumbered that lunch-counter.

Pop-eyed Moses was the sole occupant of his place, looking a trifle more sleepy than usual as he waited for his day-clerk to come from breakfast to relieve him on duty back of the bar.

But the saloon-keeper was wide enough awake to instantly recognize this visitor, and a slow grin widened his mouth as he held forth a huge but cleanly hand to grasp that extended by the King-Pin Sport.

"Not any, thanks," negatived Gayworthy, as Moses reached toward the decanters. "I'm wearing the blue ribbon, now, pardner, until I've cleared up a bit of a job I've undertaken for a particular friend. And—what has become of the corpus, Moses?"

"A friend done come and tuck it fer better keering, ye see," slowly explained the saloon-keeper, one hand rising to rub his chin as though its owner hardly knew how his information would be received.

"What friend? Do you know him, Moses?"

Ten-Strike Tom spoke quietly enough, but there was an unusually brilliant gleam in his jetty eyes as he put the question, for—surely one portion of that perplexing puzzle was about to be solved!

Unless that friend was also playing a part!

There was just time enough for this disagreeable suspicion to find birth before the slow-speaking Moses made reply, but then the doubt vanished as quickly.

"Know him like a book, boss! He's called Jason Dogood. Sort o' miner, when he wants a stake, an' mostly prospector when he kin 'ford it."

"Straight goods, is he?"

"Straight as a string with a weight on both ends—yes! I'd go my last dollar on Jason Dogood, fer—"

"Stiddy, thar! Talk of a angel, an' you'll smell sulphire, Moses o' the bug-out peepers!" came a shrill, peculiar voice from the front of the Good Luck, and then the broad, burly figure of a genial-eyed, rough-clad man darkened the entrance.

"Which right thar he be, now!" ejaculated Pop-eyed Moses, with considerably more animation than he was accustomed to exhibit so

early in the morning. "Come in, Dogood! Hyar's a gent what— You say it, boss, fer my clapper's gittin' too mighty tired!"

As he spoke, Pop-eyed Moses waved his hands to serve as introduction, but this ceremony was hardly necessary.

The new-comer promptly advanced, extending a hand with a frank smile to back it up as he spoke:

"I know Ten-Strike Tom, even if he don't know me, so—put it right thar, fer ninety days, sir! I'm Jase Dogood, an' I try my level not to clean disgrace the last name—yes!"

"I'm glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Dogood, and particularly so just now. For—Moses tells me you found a friend of yours here, last night?"

That smile faded away, and a troubled frown took its place.

"Not so much a friend, sir, as the son of a friend," he made reply, all trace of levity leaving his tones. "Moses told me what you did, or what you tried to do, ruther, an' that's one reason why I come back this mornin'; to git onto your trail, to thankee fer the lad's mother."

"I need no thanks, sir, but—may I ask the name of your young friend?" gravely inquired the King-Pin Sport.

"Why not? I never hed so mighty much truck with him, but I knowed his folks right smart, an' his mother—oh, yes! The lad was called Corse Payson, an' his mother—Widder Payson, now—she keeps a reel scrumptious boardin'-house in Denver, whar I've— Eh?"

For Ten-Strike Tom gave an abrupt start and a half-smothered exclamation at that last name, and though he spoke evenly enough, there was an unusual glow in his dark eyes as he asked for and received both street and number of that boarding-house.

How well he remembered it, then! In a secret pocket right above his heart rested a neatly folded letter, signed "Fanny Barbour," and at its head was written that very street, and that identical number!

Driving back the ugly suspicions which found birth together with that strange coincidence—rendered all the more remarkable when he took into consideration that blood-soaked scrap of paper, and the broken names it contained—Thomas Gayworthy questioned Jason Dogood closely, for one thing asking if he knew or had ever heard of the H. K. Jones mentioned in the posters with which Leadville was liberally supplied.

No; Dogood could give him no light on that point; and after bidding the veteran bury Corse Payson decently, at his expense, the cost of all to be figured up and passed over to Pop-eyed Moses, who would promptly settle the bill, Ten-Strike Tom took his departure with hasty steps.

There was nothing in his calm countenance to betray the powerful excitement which he really felt, but if any one had heedlessly gotten in the Sport's way, just then, he would have thought a mountain had risen up to fall upon him!

Since the slain man was not H. K. Jones, wasn't it positive his slayer bore that name? If not, why had those dying lips pronounced that name so distinctly?

And if H. K. Jones, was he the same man who had written Fanny Barbour her last tidings concerning Anson Barbour, her father? And—what did those incomplete names mean, in that bloody bit of paper?

These were only a few of the busy thoughts which troubled Gayworthy as he strode swiftly on to the livery-stable where his favorite saddle-horse was put up, and bidding that animal be prepared for the road with as little delay as possible, the King-Pin Sport hurried back to his hotel, with word for the horse to be sent after him, in haste.

Swiftly changing his garments for others more suitable for a long and rough ride, then securing a compact package of food which was hurriedly arranged for him by one of the servants, Gayworthy gained the street where his spirited steed was standing in charge of a stable-boy.

Tossing the lad a bright dollar, Gayworthy sprang into the saddle and trotted out of town, striking into the regular Denver trail at a more rapid pace, little suspecting who was peering from ambush, muttering:

"Too late, ye bloodhound! Denver's 175 miles away, and if ye had the wings of an eagle, still you'd be too late to save the girl!"

CHAPTER XIII.

NEWS OF THE MISSING MINER.

WALLACE GILMORE slackened his brisk pace as he drew near the boarding-house conducted by Widow Payson, under whose friendly roof Fanny Barbour had found temporary shelter while endeavoring to solve the mystery which enshrouded the fate of her father, Anson Barbour.

He cast quick, searching looks up and down the street before mounting those low, broad steps leading to the front entrance, and the glow of gaslight from the ground-glass globe above that portal revealed a face far more anxious than hopeful.

Mr. Gilmore had lost all traces of hurry, too, and his feet seemed to have suddenly grown wondrously heavy during those last few seconds; but his gloved hand went forth to grasp the bell without hesitation, and speech came promptly enough when that summons was answered.

"Miss Barbour is in?"

"Yes, sir. I just saw her go into the back parlor, and—"

"Thanks!" and Gilmore deftly slipped a solid coin into that by no means unwilling palm as he added: "Never mind; I am expected, and will introduce myself, thank you!"

Without stopping to receive the murmured gratitude which the comely maid was willing enough to return for that *douceur*, Wallace Gilmore passed along the hall until at the door through which Fanny Barbour had shown him once before.

His hand was lifting to rap in token of a desire to enter, but that proved wholly unnecessary; the door swung open, and the pale, yet still beautiful countenance of Miss Barbour met his gaze.

"I heard— Will you step in, sir?" she spoke, in tones which she tried in vain to keep steady and even. "I felt that you were coming, and when I heard your voice—"

"You really recognized my voice, Miss Fanny?" asked the young gentleman, flushing a bit as his eyes caught a brighter glow. "After hearing it only once, and then—"

"Oh, sir!" huskily exclaimed Fanny, hand closing almost convulsively on his arm as she gazed into his face, paying not the slightest heed to his words the while. "What is it? You surely have heard—you bring me news of my poor father?"

That anticipatory smile faded out to give place to a frown, and almost rudely freeing his arm from that trembling grasp, Wallace Gilmore turned away to a convenient stand, on which he dropped his hat, the action helping to cover his involuntary display of anger.

Her sole thought was of that missing parent, then, and his coming had naught to do with that eager welcome?

This unwelcome fact received still further confirmation when Fanny followed him, speaking swiftly, and even less clearly than at first:

"You have—bad news! Your face betrays that much! Oh, sir! tell me that—tell me all! I am strong. I can bear up under it. Anything is better than this awful suspense!"

That frown was gone, now, and as he turned to meet that longing yet fearful gaze, Wallace Gilmore was once more master of himself, and his smile partially relieved those fears even before his tongue spoke.

"If I really bring tidings, Miss Fanny, 'tis hardly bad news, for—"

Less able to bear up against hope than despair, the maiden swayed like one attacked with vertigo, and Wallace Gilmore promptly improved his opportunity, lending her gentle support to the nearest couch, where he sat down by her side, holding her trembling hands in his, speaking rapidly yet soothingly the while.

"I honestly believe I may bid you hope, Miss Fanny! I firmly feel that your father is yet alive and will be heard from if not actually seen, in a very short space of time."

Fanny quickly rallied now that her worst fears were banished, and with a soft flush creeping into her fair cheeks, making her look even more lovely than before as she began to realize her situation, she gently freed her hands and moved a bit away from the gentleman seated beside her.

Wallace Gilmore was quick-witted enough, and knew how to take a hint without waiting for worse.

Quietly rising, he drew a chair nearer the couch, speaking as he reseated himself, making it all seem perfectly right and natural by his adroitness.

"I really ought to beg your pardon, Miss Fanny, for so clumsily startling you, but I had no such intention, I assure you. I only wished to break the news—"

"You have news, then? Of my—of father, sir?"

"Unless the fellow who brought me word is a rank impostor—yes," gravely answered the gentleman.

Fanny lost something of that glad anticipation from her face, but she was gathering her shaken nerves, now, and bravely asked a further explanation, with her eyes instead of voice.

Bowing to signify his comprehension of that mute request, Wallace Gilmore seemed arranging his own thoughts for a brief space, then spoke with greater deliberation:

"I will tell you all about it, Miss Fanny, and then you will be better able to judge just how much this information is worth."

"When I had the pleasure of escorting you home, last evening, after saving you further annoyance from that trampish-looking rascal, I had just a bit too much food for thought to pay any particular attention to what might be going on around me. And so—well, as it turned out, some one saw me as I left this house, and dogged me clear to my rooms!"

"You were not—no harm came to you, sir?" almost timidly asked the maiden after a brief pause, like one feeling a remark of some sort is expected.

Gilmore gave a slight start, then smiled faintly.

"I really beg your pardon, Fan—Miss Barbour! I was thinking of—of something else. I didn't—let that pass, please, and I'll tell you just what did happen, then."

"Not last night, nor this morning, either, but well along this afternoon. A fellow came to me, and after beating around the bush until my stock of patience was well-nigh exhausted, let fall some hints as to your father, Anson Barbour."

The anxious daughter made a quick, impatient gesture as she cried out in her eagerness to learn all:

"Why did you not bring him here, to me? Oh, tell me where I can find him, so I can glean from his own lips—my poor, lost father!"

Her fears gained the upper-hand once more, for Wallace Gilmore was shaking his head, decidedly, and she put the worst interpretation upon that gesture.

"I surely would have brought the fellow to see you, Miss Fanny, had I felt certain he was just what he claimed to be. I was afraid—I feared for you, lest something prove wrong, you understand?"

"I wish I could understand, but—what could harm me, sir?" faltered the maiden, brushing a hand across her brows with a troubled air.

Wallace Gilmore made a slight gesture, then added:

"I may have been wrong; I'm trying to hope I was wrong; but still I couldn't help doubting the fellow—and I'll tell you why:

"He let fall sundry hints as though he knew something of importance concerning a gentleman named Anson Barbour—"

"My father!"

"Your father, yes. But when I tried to pin him down to naked facts, and asked him for more positive information, the fellow squirmed out of it after a fashion which made me half-suspect he was far more knave than honest messenger!"

"Oh, if I might only see him, face to face!" passionately exclaimed the daughter, hands clasping and eyes all aglow. "He would not refuse to tell me! I surely could glean— May I not see him, sir?"

Wallace Gilmore hesitated before making answer. There was a slight frown wrinkling his brows, and a light as of uneasiness in his gray eyes.

He seemed debating within himself just how much he ought to tell, but then his mustached lips parted, to pronounce:

"Please wait, Miss Fanny, until you have

heard me to a finish, then if you still desire to see this fellow—"

"Surely, since he comes from my father—"

"Does he, though?" swiftly interjected Gilmore. "That's the doubt I'm worrying over the most, don't you see, Miss Fanny? If he really knew anything of importance, wouldn't he be willing to tell me, especially as I bade him set his own price for the information?"

"You think, then?"

"Might it not be that he noticed some of the advertisements you have inserted in the papers, and from them conceived an idea that he might bleed your purse?"

"If so, why refuse the reward you offered him, sir?"

Wallace Gilmore gave an abrupt start at this crisply-put query, and his visage brightened up wonderfully as he ejaculated:

"I never once thought of that! Why should he, for a fact? And— Let me finish, please, Miss Fanny, then I'll listen to your opinion."

"This fellow—Bascom Hooper, as he gave his name—told me he had been looking you up for several days, but that he failed to strike oil until last night, when he recognized you as we were just reaching this house."

"He said he watched until I came forth, then he dogged me home, only leaving after he had learned my name and the fact that I was a permanent guest at that hotel."

"After making this explanation, he let fall the hints I told you of, only to doggedly decline giving me more light, let me offer what I might."

"When I accused him of being a fraud, he retorted that it made very little difference what my opinion of him might be, so long as the young lady took him for what he was worth. And then he swore right roundly that he held proof sufficient to fully satisfy Fanny Barbour he came direct from her long-missing father; but that he positively declined to speak more definitely to an outsider like—myself!"

Wallace Gilmore flung out a hand as he pronounced that last word, with the air of one who has fairly rid himself of an inconvenient burden, but Fanny hardly heeded the man in her intense interest in the message he brought, imperfect though that surely was.

"Oh, if you had only brought him here! If I only might—why has he not come to me, then, since he knew I lived here?"

Gilmore shook his head, gravely, then slowly made reply:

"I'm afraid you'll have to blame me for that, Miss Fanny. In my fears lest you be rudely annoyed, I took a precaution—well, then, to boil it all down. I told the fellow to keep away from here until I gained permission to introduce him, under penalty of being arrested as a blackmailer!"

Her face wore a troubled, regretful look, but Fanny could not bring herself to say just what she thought. At least, this gentleman had acted for what he thought her best interests.

Wallace Gilmore brightened up a bit as he failed to receive the reproof he clearly anticipated, and rising from his seat, he spoke again:

"I can plainly see you think I acted unwisely in threatening this stranger, Miss Barbour, but—"

"No, no, not unwisely from your point of view, sir, but—is there no way by which I can summon that stranger, sir? If I might only see him face to face, surely I could win the whole truth from his lips?"

"You shall see him, Miss Fanny, if he hasn't jumped the town!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MISSING MINER'S MESSENGER.

WALLACE GILMORE caught up his hat as he spoke, but paused, as Fanny Barbour gave a low exclamation, her face betraying that new fear.

"You do not think—surely you have not frightened him away?"

"Not unless he is actually the impostor I took him to be," quickly assured the man. "If he has fled from Denver, that will be ample proof as to his trickery. If he is

honest, be sure he will remain in town until he has fully performed his mission."

"And you—can you find him, Mr. Gilmore?"

"If he is in town, yes," decisively asserted Wallace. "I will not only find, but I'll fetch him here for you to question, Miss Fanny. Until then, good-by!"

Like one who means to waste no unnecessary time in getting down to solid business, Wallace Gilmore left the room and house, taking no heed of if he noted the fact that the maiden followed him to the front door, lingering there until his briskly-moving figure faded away amidst the shadows of night.

Fanny was still standing on the threshold, her thoughts so wholly occupied with this fresh complication in the mystery which she was hoping to solve, that she never heard a sound of that stealthy approach, nor knew that any eyes were upon her trim shape as it stood outlined against the lighted hallway, until a low, husky voice addressed her, with:

"Isn't this Miss Fanny Barbour, ma'am?"

The maiden started and shrunk back a pace, but before she could do more or say aught, the roughly-clad form of a man came forward into the gas-light, one hand making a deprecatory gesture while its mate deferentially touched the brim of a soft felt hat.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am, if I startled you by speaking so abruptly; but I was afraid you'd draw back, and I'd lose my chance of speaking at all. So—you really are Miss Fanny Barbour?"

"I am Miss Barbour. And you are—"

"I reckon he told you, ma'am," with shoulders shrugging and thumb twitching toward the corner where her eyes had lost sight of Wallace Gilmore. "I'm Bascom Hooper, who—"

Fanny gave a low, glad cry that cut short his explanation, and the next instant her hands were closing upon his nearest arm, urging him up those steps to the entrance of the boarding-house.

"Oh, sir, I'm so glad! I began to fear that— My father? Tell me of my poor, dear father! You have seen him? He is alive— and well?"

Bascom Hooper flashed a swift glance around, up and down that quiet street, as though he feared observation or interruption, then stepped hastily forward, taking the maiden with him.

"Beg your pardon, miss," he said, as the heavy door swung to behind them, his hat coming off to reveal the frosty hair covering a not unshapely head. "Reckon you'll think I'm pretty brash, but the fact is—did that young gent tell you he swore to turn me over to the cops if I came here to see you, without his permission?"

"That was a mistake, for which Mr. Gilmore is sorry, now," quickly explained the maiden, leading the way through hall to the back parlor, where she knew they stood little danger of untimely interruption, at that hour. "Now, sir, pray relieve my suspense! My father?"

Bascom Hooper cast a slow glance of approval around the room, giving a curt nod of his head as though fully content with his present surroundings, apparently without hearing that anxious question.

Almost involuntarily Fanny Barbour took note of his outer man, even then feeling a vague wonder that Wallace Gilmore should have so promptly set down this person as an impostor.

Something past the middle age, Bascom Hooper was firmly if not very heavily built, his frame giving evidence of no little muscular power, in combination with great activity.

Both hair and full beard were now iron-gray, but they had once been of inky blackness, to match his dark eyes, still full of fire and animation, even while in comparative repose, as now.

His garb was cheap, but fairly well fitting and perfectly clean. He seemed more like a laboring man in comfortable circumstances than the tramp or "traveling fraud" to which Wallace Gilmore had likened him.

Those piercing eyes suddenly came back to the maiden, catching her making this visual study, and Bascom Hooper gave a grim smile and subdued chuckle as Fanny drew back a bit, in slight confusion.

"Don't mention it, ma'am, for I was giving you the chance on purpose, just to part-way balance the impression that young gent may have left on your mind."

"I never—he didn't—if you would please tell me of father, sir?" falteringly spoke up the anxious daughter.

"That's just what I came here for, ma'am, and to make the send-off as smooth as may be—Anson Barbour is playing in mighty hard luck, just now, but he was never more alive, nor ever in sounder health, than he is this blessed minute!"

Fanny gave a gasping breath of intense relief, sinking back upon the couch with face very pale, with one hand clasped above her wildly-throbbing heart, but with the awful dread those first words had given birth to, banished from her mind.

"With so much by way of a starter, miss, I'll talk straight as a stretched string, letting the boss do the smoothing over when he and you meet up with each other: and that'll be pretty much when you feel like it, Miss Fanny."

"The boss? Do you mean—my father, sir?"

"He's my boss, yes," with a short nod of assent. "He's playing in such hard luck, right now, that he couldn't well come here after you, miss, or he'd be making all this chin-music instead of me: see?"

"I don't— Father sent you, sir? How did he know—"

"Through the newspapers, miss. The advertisements you put in, asking information concerning Anson Barbour, told him right where to look for you; leastways, that you were here in Denver. And so—well, he sent me here to hunt you out and fetch you to him, quick as the law allows!"

"To join him—where at, sir?"

Bascom Hooper shook his head, positively. "As to that, ma'am, I'm not saying, just now nor just here, but the distance to your father isn't so mighty great but what you might cross it on horseback, or in a rig, for the matter o' that."

This queer evasion in a measure awakened doubts in Fanny's breast, and her changing countenance showed as much, even before she spoke again:

"You say my father sent you, because he was unable to come in person, Mr. Hooper?"

"Well, you can let it go at that, ma'am."

"Yet you say father was—is well?"

That iron gray head nodded assent once more.

"Then, why didn't father write to me? Why not send me a line in his own hand, over his own signature, that I might be sure you—"

An abrupt gesture cut her vehement speech short, and Bascom Hooper made crisp reply to her growing doubts.

"I've got nothing at all to do with that, ma'am. I reckon the boss will explain it all when you two come together once more. If not—well, if that meeting fails to take place, I'm not the one in fault!"

The stranger settled a bit further in his chair, but then, as though struck by a sudden memory, or, possibly, warned by the growing doubts with which yonder fair face was clouded, he leaned forward with one hand slipping into his breast, to emerge again holding a small parcel done up in blank paper.

His roughened fingers quickly unwrapped the paper as he added:

"Did you ever happen to see anything like this, ma'am?"

He extended a hand, in the palm of which gleamed a golden locket and coiled chain, such as are frequently worn about the throat by woman or child; and as Fanny Barbour leaned eagerly forward, a slight motion of that hand turned the locket over to exhibit another side, curiously and elaborately enameled in colors.

The maiden gave a low, gasping cry as this met her eyes, and she almost snatched the jewelry from his palm, turning toward the nearest gas-jet, the more accurately to observe that work of art.

"Have I ever—look!" and her thumb pressed a hidden spring which caused the locket to fly open on its hinges, letting the light fall upon a pair of admirably-painted miniatures, one of a woman the other of a little girl. "My mother!" she added with a choking sob pressing her lips to the por-

trait, then glancing less keenly at the other likeness.

Bascom Hooper smiled grimly as he saw this, but his lips remained closed, like one fairly well satisfied with the way matters are working, and wise enough to let well alone.

Fanny Barbour lifted her free hand to her own throat, drawing from her bosom by the chain attached, another locket which proved to be an exact counterpart of the one produced by this messenger from the long-missing miner, Anson Barbour.

Touching a like spring, Fanny leaned nearer to that messenger, showing him the two portraits her locket contained; one of the same child held in a leaf of the first locket, its opposite miniature that of a man under middle age, bearded heavily, yet bearing an almost startling resemblance to that little girl.

"See!" she said, agitatedly, first showing the enameled back of the locket, then exposing the inside. "Both alike! My picture, taken at the same time; in your locket with mother, in mine with father!"

Bascom Hooper glanced at the child's face, but lingered much longer over that of the father. Then he spoke in softer tones:

"That's the boss, plain enough, ma'am, though he don't look quite so mighty spruced up, now, nor quite so young, for the matter o' that! Still, I'd know it for the boss if I was to meet it in the dark!"

"And he—my father gave you this locket?"

"The boss did just that, ma'am!" positively asserted the messenger, head nodding in concert with tongue. "He give me that, saying for me to show it only if I couldn't get you to listen to reason without."

"Not show it? I don't—What does all this puzzle mean, sir?" exclaimed the bewildered maiden.

"That's more'n I'm at liberty to explain, ma'am," gravely declared Hooper, his heavy brows contracting a bit. "It'll all be made clear enough, I reckon, when you come to the boss—for you'll come, ma'am?"

"If I only knew—and yet—the locket! Mamma's picture!"

That frown became little less than a scowl, now, but before those downcast eyes were lifted to his face again, Bascom Hooper was forcing a smile which seemed genuine, even if it was counterfeit.

"You see, Miss Barbour, it's just this way: The boss gave me that locket at the last, and told me to show it to you, if I just had to. If I did show it, he said, I was to say like this:

"If she's still my child—if she's a true daughter to the man whose portrait shows in this locket—tell Fanny to make all possible haste in coming to me—her only living parent!"

"That is what the boss said, Miss Barbour, word for word. I couldn't have forgotten any word, because I kept on saying of 'em over until they were like mighty black print on my brain. Now—what is it, ma'am?"

"If I only knew! Why didn't he come, in person? You said—surely you told me that—he is well? He is not—he has met with no serious injury, sir?"

Fanny fairly held her breath, but Bascom Hooper hesitated to speak.

CHAPTER XV.

A DRIVE CUT SHORT.

BARELY long enough for that hesitation to make itself felt, then the messenger from the missing miner spoke in stern, almost dogged tones:

"If she's still my child—if she's a true daughter to the man whose portrait shows in this locket—tell Fanny to make all possible haste in coming to me—her only living parent!"

Word for word that real or pretended message was repeated, and then Bascom Hooper closed lips over locked jaws, like one who has no further argument to offer.

The maiden was more strongly impressed by this crisp repetition than she would have been by a more elaborate argument, and as her troubled eyes drooped to that enameled locket alluded to, her hesitation vanished and she cried, impulsively:

"I am his child! I am his true daughter! I will go to him, oh, so gladly! But—how can I, sir?"

"That's my part of the job, ma'am," more briskly spoke up the man from the lost one, his face brightening up wonderfully as this last obstacle seemed to melt away. "It'll come out all right, now, unless you should take a sudden skeer—never mind that, though! You'll go—and right off?"

"Tell me how I may, sir, and I will not fail you, since it's my dear father who calls," bravely answered the maiden, rising to her feet as Bascom Hooper left his chair.

"I'll show you the way to the one that's waiting so mighty eager for you, ma'am, just as quick as I can get a handy rig for the trip. And while I'm doing that, reckon you'd better pack up a small bundle of such doin's as a lady wants most when she's where folks have to sort o' rough it, like. You understand, don't you?"

"We are going out of town, then, sir?"

"Not so mighty far but what you can get back here if you need any little thing right bad, though," he said with a genial smile, as he picked up his hat and moved toward the door. "That don't frighten you too much, does it, Miss Fanny?"

She shook her head negatively, though her face remained pale and in her big blue eyes lingered a troubled light.

"It's only that we may be a few days where you couldn't easy get a supply of such things, or fit yourself out again; nothing worse. And—you don't want all this bee-hive swarming out to see you take wing, I reckon—eh?"

"Do you mean that I mustn't tell any person where I am going, sir?" asked Fanny, with something of doubt showing itself in her face, again.

"Not knowing, you can't easy tell," with a subdued chuckle that seemed the very essence of good nature. "What I meant was it might be just a weenty bit awkward to you, if they was to ask where you was bound in such a hurry, and what for; see?"

That put a little better complexion on the matter, and Fanny nodded her comprehension, saying as they passed into the hall:

"Very well. I'll be ready when you return, if—that will not be so very long, sir?"

"Just long 'nough to get a good hack, ma'am. Until then—so long!"

Bascom Hooper took his leave hurriedly, and then Fanny passed up the stairs to her own chamber, where she immediately fell to work packing a small valise or hand-bag with sundry articles which she could not well dispense with, her brain in an almost dizzy whirl the while.

She could not well doubt this man, after the tangible proof he had shown to her; and yet—what could it all mean?

If her father was living, and well, as that messenger declared, why had he remained away for so many weary months? Why did he not come in person to greet the daughter who inserted the many advertisements his envoy had spoken of?

What could Bascom Hooper mean by saying her father—his "boss"—was "playing in mighty hard luck?"

A faint, unacknowledged dread lest Anson Barbour had in some manner come under the ban of the law more than once intruded itself, only to be as often banished with true daughterly loyalty.

Through all her haste in selecting and packing those feminine necessities, Fanny felt a haunting conviction that she ought to let either or both Wallace Gilmore and Thomas Gayworthy know of her hasty flitting, but as often recurred that thinly-veiled warning let fall by Bascom Hooper.

Although he had not said so in plain speech, she felt convinced that he wished her method of departure kept as close a secret as might be. And—would publicity injure her father?

A little shiver crept over the girl as she wondered, but she made no attempt to answer her own query; to do that would be bringing up the haunting dread of the law once more!

With her bag closely crammed, Fanny put on her bonnet and wraps, both suitable for a night ride, pausing for the space of a single breath at her chamber door, to listen if there

was a likelihood of her meeting either Mrs. Payson or any of the boarders on her way to the front door.

There was nothing to indicate such a meeting, but Fanny arranged a word or two which would sufficiently excuse her appearance in case any such encounter should take place, then swiftly and silently tripped downstairs, through the hall to the front entrance, giving a sharp breath as she caught the sound of wheels drawing near.

Opening the door, Fanny emerged from the boarding-house just as an ordinary-looking hack, or close carriage such as ply the streets for casual patrons, rolled up to the curb-stones, only a short distance from the building.

The door swung open, and a figure sprang forth, which Fanny immediately recognized as that of Bascom Hooper, and with a low, agitated exclamation she ran down the steps to the pavement.

"Just in time, ma'am, and I'm mighty glad you're one o' the few who don't have to keep a fellow waiting, cooling his heels while—Right this way, please, ma'am!"

Hooper spoke briskly enough, though in subdued tones, as he reached out one hand for that bag, its mate offering assistance to the young lady herself; but before Fanny could enter the hack, there came a sharp exclamation from up the street, and as both involuntarily turned eyes in that direction, Wallace Gilmore came swiftly on the scene.

Recognition was mutual, and with only a curt nod toward the young lady, Gilmore spoke to the man:

"What does all this mean, Hooper? I thought I warned you—"

"By what right, I'd like to know, sir?" surlily retorted the messenger from the long-missing miner. "I'm taking this lady to one she's anxious to meet, and you've no right to interfere, as I know of!"

"He say true, Miss Barbour?" turning to the maiden and lifting his hat politely. "You are going of your own free will, then?"

"Yes, sir, but—" hesitatingly began Fanny, and thus giving the young man the very opening he most desired.

"Very well, then. Permit me, please."

He gently took her arm, assisting her into the hack, then stepping through the same open door with adroit celerity, seating himself by the side of the young lady.

"Oh, I say!" burst forth Bascom Hooper, clearly taken aback by this cool procedure.

"Say on, my dear fellow, but if you think talk alone can get me out of this seat, you're 'way off your base," coolly retorted Gilmore.

"But I never bargained for your company, and that isn't—"

"You get so much the more for your money, then, Hooper. I am going with this lady, to make sure she don't—if you're playing on the dead square, man, why raise objections to my accompanying you?"

"The lady—"

"Can speak for herself, no doubt. Are you willing that I should bear you company until you meet your father, Miss Barbour?"

"Oh, sir, if you only will!" impulsively exclaimed Fanny, trembling like a leaf, hardly knowing what to think with all this crowding upon her so suddenly.

"Will that content you, Mr. Hooper?" asked Gilmore, a half-sneer in his voice as he turned once again to look at that irresolute figure.

The messenger was looking down the street, in the opposite direction from that in which Wallace Gilmore had come, where the corner gaslight shone upon a uniformed figure, the wearer of which was evidently gazing curiously their way.

Like one who concludes to accept what cannot well be helped, Bascom Hooper spoke sharply to the driver on the box, then entered the hack and closed the door, just as the horses sprung into motion.

"All right; if Miss Fanny don't object, I can't see as I've any real call to kick against your crowding in, sir," gruffly declared the messenger, taking the opposite seat.

As the hack drove past that uniformed shape, Fanny Barbour looked out at the lowered window, glancing back at the building which had been her home for the past few weeks; but as they whirled around the next corner, she sunk back again, lowering her veil as though there was something very

near her eyes which she wished to hide from these men.

The man on the box-seat evidently had received his instructions beforehand, for he drove at a rapid, steady gait, making turn after turn, yet all the while leaving the more populous portion of the city further behind them; and it speedily became apparent that their immediate destination lay somewhere outside of Denver.

Both Gilmore and Hooper respected the evident agitation of the fair passenger, and hardly a word passed between the two men until after the city was left fairly behind them, and the hack was rolling at a lively rate along one of the sandy roads for which Denver is noted.

Although the twinkling lights of the desert city were still visible, that road seemed utterly deserted by all save their vehicle and its contents, nor had they met a human being since fairly passing the outlying shanties of the town.

Wallace Gilmore evidently was growing nervous or uneasy from some cause, for he shifted on his seat, repeatedly thrusting head out at window, glancing both ahead and to the rear. He was trying to make out their present whereabouts, or, possibly, striving to guess their destination, for he drew back at length, sharply asking Bascom Hooper whether they were bound, and how much longer it would take the team to get there?

"You crowded in without being asked, and if you don't like the way I'm running this machine, get out and walk back!" bluntly said Hooper.

"I begin to believe you're a scoundrel who—"

"And I know you're a fool!" harshly cried the other, fastening both hands upon the younger man with vicious swiftness, dashing him against the door of the hack with such force that the catch gave way, letting both men fall outside just as the driver, evidently startled by their angry voices, reined in his team.

Wallace Gilmore fell undermost, and that fall seemed to have stunned him, or to have driven the breath from his body so completely that he was poorly fitted for a fight with such an adversary as Bascom Hooper proved himself.

Still, he struggled to what extent lay in his power, and there came to the ears of the bewildered and frightened maiden, his hoarse cry:

"You treacherous devil! I'll die in her defense, but—"

His further speech was cut short by a pistol-shot, and while Bascom Hooper sprang to his feet, the form of Wallace Gilmore lay there on the sands, looking awfully corpse-like in the clear moonlight!

CHAPTER XVI.

A DOVE AMONG VULTURES.

HALF-paralyzed by this sudden outbreak, and at first unable to fully comprehend what it really meant, Fanny Barbour saw the men grappling each other, saw the door fly open to let them pitch forth upon the sands where a brief struggle ended in—what?

She saw the agile figure of Bascom Hooper spring to his feet, and caught a glimpse of a gleaming weapon in his partly-extended hand: covering that now silent, motionless shape lying there in the moonlight!

Even yet the bewildered maiden failed to realize the full extent of the peril which surely menaced herself, but then came a warning cry from the lips of the driver.

"Mind the gal don't slip yer grip, pardner! Ef she takes a notion fer to jump the game like— Stiddy, thar!"

His horses gave a start as though to break away in fright at the smell of burnt powder—or, was it the freshly shed blood?

Bascom Hooper gave a harsh oath as he turned to jump for their heads, at the same time saying:

"He would have it, matel! I had to get shut of him somehow, and it came easiest to blow his roof off!"

Like a revelation the whole terrible truth broke upon the maiden, and she realized that she had blindly entered a cunning trap laid by as yet unknown enemies who— Her poor father!

Wild with fright Fanny pushed back that swinging door and leaped to earth, turning toward the far-off lights of the great city in

her flight; but she was not to escape the snare of the fowlers so readily!

Bascom Hooper was now at the head of the frightened span, and with another warning cry, the driver leaped from his perch, dashing swiftly in pursuit of the fleeing maiden, overtaking her and grasping both arm and waist, laughing harshly as he brought her to a standstill.

"Whoa-ap, pritty-be-night!" he cried, coarsely, turning his prize around until her frightened eyes met his.

With a sickening dread Fanny recognized the thievish tramp who snatched her purse on the evening of her first encountering Wallace Gilmore, and now her last faint hope fled.

Beyond a doubt she was trapped by the enemy!

"Better'n nippin' weasels, hain't it, pritty?" chucklingly asked the tramp, then tightening his grip about her waist, lifting her clear of the ground and hurrying back to where Bascom Hooper guarded the team.

"Hyar's yer per-immon, pardner! Shell we swap off? Ef you'll hitch onto the gal, I'll keer fer the critters!"

As his loathsome clutch fell away, Fanny seemed to pluck up courage once more; but ere she could speak, Hooper sternly broke forth with:

"Have you turned crazy, Miss Barbour? Keep quiet, if only for your dear father's sake!"

"My father! You lied to me! You said—"

"I didn't lie to you, either," coolly cut in the messenger, real or counterfeit, one hand going forth to close upon her wrist. "I simply hid part of the truth, until you should be better prepared to learn it all."

"You promised to take me to my—to Anson Barbour!"

"I promised you just that, and I'll make you the same promise over again if you wish to have it," came the swift retort. "Your father is at no very great distance from here, anxiously awaiting your arrival, but when—"

Fanny gave a desperate effort to break away from that grip, hardly knowing what words passed her lips in that terrible agitation; yet they put in shape the awful fear which had freshly assailed her on witnessing the downfall of Wallace Gilmore.

"A lie! You have murdered him—my poor, dear father! Let me go! I will not—let me go, I say! How can I trust you further, when you have acted so treacherously?"

"Not toward you, nor toward Anson Barbour, my boss, your father," the man coldly asserted. "If I wasn't sent to you by him, how could I show you that locket and chain, girl?"

Her struggles ceased on the instant, as though his words were producing the very effect he most desired, and under that impression Bascom Hooper relaxed his grip about her wrist.

"You begin to see it, don't you, ma'am?" he added, in more soothing tones. "You're not so mighty foolish as to throw away your last, your only chance of rejoining the father you've been mourning as lost or as dead for so many months? You surely wouldn't—"

"You merely made use of the locket you stole from his body, to decoy me away from all my friends!" impetuously exclaimed the maiden, once more yielding to those awful suspicions.

As these words passed her lips, Fanny jerked her wrist out of that relaxed grasp, and with a sharp, far-reaching scream for help, she sprang away through the night in headlong flight!

Her action was taken on the impulse of the moment, for she had just caught a glimpse of several dark, phantom-like shapes moving across the plain, evidently headed in their direction, probably having caught the sound of that pistol-shot.

Taking the chances on their proving friendly—and surely nothing could be worse than remaining a helpless victim in the grip of this false messenger, whose ruthless hands had but a minute since brutally slain the one friend and protector she could boast of—Fanny fled at her best pace directly for those dimly-seen shapes, crying repeatedly to them for assistance.

Strangely enough, as it seemed at first

glance, Bascom Hooper made no effort to catch the fleeing maiden, the clear moonlight showing a grim grin on his strong face as he looked after her receding form.

And the tramp, who had taken charge of the horses once more, actually broke forth in a hearty guffaw, like one enjoying a prime if masked jest.

The explanation of all this was not long delayed, for when Fanny Barbour drew near the horsemen into whom those vague outlines passed, she was caught and held prisoner, not the slightest notice being given her agitated explanations, no heed paid her prayers for assistance!

"I reckon this yer' bit o' dry-goods sort o' b'longs to you, pardner," one of the horsemen uttered, as they drew nearer the hack.

"I reckon it does, mate," briefly answered Hooper, his strong fingers once more closing upon a wrist, while his other arm passed about the maiden's waist, lending her the support her failing limbs so sorely required, just then.

"That's all right, then, an' you needn't putt yourself out too mighty much a-givin' of us-all thanks fer ropin' of your stray, pardner!" facetiously added the fellow, then shrugging his shoulders as his gaze turned to where the body of Wallace Gilmore lay as it had fallen.

"Cold meat fer breakfast, eh? Waal, you al'ays was a cuss fer luck, Bas' Hooper! All the fun over afore we ketched up, too!"

Fanny Barbour gave a low moan and a shiver as she both heard and saw all this. It banished her last hope, for she could not help realizing that these horsemen looked upon Bascom Hooper as their present leader, hence she could hope for nothing further from that quarter.

A low, hard laugh came from the bearded lips of the chief at that repining speech, then he uttered:

"I'd cheerfully have given you the job, Parker, had you joined us in time to take it off n'y hands."

"Ef you'd jest let drap a hint thar was ary sech a streak o' fat, Hooper!"

"I didn't expect anything of the sort my own self, so how could I? And the hot-headed fool wouldn't hold in until you came up. I just had to lay him out, and—Parker?"

"Head up an' both years open, boss!"

"Jump down and take a look at the fellow, will you? I hadn't time to put in any fancy licks, but I shot to kill, as the shortest way out of the bungle. Well?"

Parker sprang out of the saddle to bend over that figure, and now he rose erect, tersely reporting:

"A hole through his cabeza you kin stick two fingers in, boss!"

"Past giving any more trouble, then?"

"Waal, mebbe he'll be able fer to kick up a bobbery down below when he smells brimstone an' sulphire, boss, but he won't never make no mo' trouble up hyar, on this airth!" with grim facetiousness reported the man.

"All right!" answered Hooper, turning toward the tramp who had acted as hack-driver for the occasion. "You can dump him into your cart, Dobson; and dispose of it where and in such a manner that there'll be no after-clap. Understand, Jake?"

"Cl'ar as clean water, boss!" briskly answered the tramp. "I'm the purty posy ez kin turn that werry trick fit to suit the queen's taste, I air! Ef one o' the lad's'll hold my team—"

"Dump the carcass aboard, will you, Parker?" cut in Bascom Hooper.

"Why not? Come up, hyar, you limber-jack!" he chuckled as he bent over to fasten his irreverent clutches on that figure, half-dragging, half carrying it over to where the hack now stood. "Git right inside, boss! Take a squat onto the softest quishion, an' don't spit out o' the winder ef ye kin find room on the silk curtains! So—thar ye be, an' I hain't quite long 'nough time to spar fer to wait to rake in yer kind thanks, boss! So-long, an' sweetest dreams when ye git thar!"

With a hoarse laugh at his own clumsy wit, Parker bowed low to the supposed passenger, then turned away to mount his animal.

While this was taking place, Bascom

Hooper lifted Fanny Barbour to a side-saddle with which one of those horses was equipped, thus proving past all possible doubt that these men belonged to his party, and that they had fully expected to meet both leader and captive at or near that precise spot.

For the time being the maiden was pretty well broken in spirit, and bade fair to be easily managed until she could rally from the terrible awakening thus given her.

Mounting another led horse, Bascom Hooper settled himself in the saddle, then turned for a parting word of caution to Jake Dobson, the tramp driver.

"Get shut of that carrion as quick as you can, while making a clean job of it, Jake. Take the team back where it came from, then lay low until it's certain there's no row kicked up over the missing Sport. You take it all in, don't you?"

"An' got her all digested, boss!" confidently assured the tramp, fastening the door, then climbing nimbly up to his seat. "Ef I make ary botch or bungle, you kin kick me from Denver to York!"

Without answering this speech, or borrowing further trouble on the score of the young man who had dropped like a log at the crack of his revolver, Bascom Hooper turned away with a nod which sent his mounted men riding onward with their backs toward the distant city, while he rode close by the side of poor Fanny, who sat droopingly in her saddle, seemingly wholly broken in spirit by this bitter reverse which had come upon her just as her hopes were soaring highest.

For some few minutes they rode on in silence, but then Bascom Hooper, who had been covertly eying his prisoner all the while, broke the silence which had reigned so long, saying:

"You're making things heap sight worse than they really are, Miss Fanny. I'm taking you to your father, safe enough. And now I'll say what I didn't dare whisper in Denver: Anson Barbour is alive and well, but he is boss of a road-agent outfit, with a big price set on his head!"

CHAPTER XVII.

ANOTHER PUZZLE FOR TEN-STRIKE TOM.

THOMAS GAYWORTHY was no novice in the saddle, but it can hardly be termed a holiday amusement, this riding post for nearly two hundred miles along a mountain stage-trail—for road it could scarcely be called.

What he would not have done for himself, Ten-Strike Tom did for the young woman who had, thanks to a school-girl intimacy with his only sister, "Flossy" Gayworthy, engaged him to solve the mystery which surrounded the fate or present whereabouts of Anson Barbour, Fanny's father.

Without losing a minute beyond what was absolutely necessary to feed, water and rest his good horse, the King-Pin Sport made the hot pace from Leadville to Denver, looking pale and jaded when the "Queen City of the Plains" was reached, but even then delaying barely long enough to refit himself at the chambers which he had under permanent engagement.

Little trace of his extraordinary exertions remained visible in face, figure or in motions as Thomas Gayworthy mounted the steps and rung the door-bell at Widow Payson's boarding-house.

A couple of minutes later he was inside, asking for Miss Barbour, and Mrs. Payson was betraying something of the motherly anxiety she had been accumulating ever since that unceremonious departure was taken.

At her first words Ten-Strike Tom felt his heart give a big jump, then a swift flutter as though something had suddenly gone wrong with that delicate bit of internal mechanism; but he held outward control of all emotions, and the worthy landlady never so much as suspected how powerful was his anxiety to learn all she could tell.

Unfortunately, that was far from being all one might have wished.

Miss Fanny had taken her departure without warning or explanation. Her apartment remained much as usual, her personal belongings not even stowed away in trunk or valise, as surely would have been the case had she meant that departure to be for good and all.

"How did she go? And when?"

Only the last night that ever was, sir! And in a carriage of some sort, Mrs. Payson believed.

Why that belief? Was she not positive, one way or the other?

No, sir; how could she swear to what she had no personal knowledge of? But Katy—one of the maids—spoke of hearing a carriage stop in front of the house that evening, and when she took a sly peep out at the window, she saw a close hack just driving away. And so—Miss Fanny had never been seen by any person living beneath that roof since then.

While Mrs. Payson was giving up the little information that she had on that particular point, Gayworthy was almost unconsciously trying to trace a resemblance between that fair, still comely and motherly countenance, and the face of the dead man whom he had seen, first and last, in Pop-eyed Moses's Good Luck Saloon.

He tried to banish that grim vision, and to fix his mind wholly on what the landlady was trying to explain, but with poor success. He kept seeing that corpse, kept tracing the resemblance which grew stronger and clearer, until he had to bite his lips sharply in order to keep back the words which would have carried woeful grief to that poor, unsuspecting mother!

At length Mrs. Payson ceased speaking, having fully rung the changes so far as that unaccountable departure was concerned, and before she could fairly pick up another string, Mr. Gayworthy was briefly but clearly explaining his peculiar interest in that young lady and her immediate movements.

First showing how important it was that he should be put into communication with Miss Barbour as soon as possible, Mr. Gayworthy penciled his name and number on one of his hotel cards, giving this to the landlady and begging her to immediately send word to that address when she either saw or heard from Miss Barbour.

Without breaking to the mother the sad tidings he might of her son, Ten-Strike Tom left the house, feeling a strange heaviness about the heart-region as he thought of Fanny Barbour and her unexpected vanishment.

Whither had she gone, and why? If obliged to leave that boarding-house for any urgent cause, why had she not notified him, her confidential agent?

Had she taken her departure in the close hack spoken of? If so, who ordered it? How had she secured its services, since none of the servants employed at her boarding-place seemed to have run her errand?

Full of this fresh puzzle, Ten-Strike Tom took no heed of whither his mechanically-moving legs were carrying him, and he would have come into actual collision with a tall, athletic figure in uniform moving in an opposite direction to himself, only for a better seeing pair of eyes.

"Surely not too proud to pass the time o' day with a man on duty, Mr. Gayworthy?" pronounced a deeply musical voice, and giving both start and exclamation, the King-Pin Sport came back to the present.

"Hallo, Williamson!" he said, in response, recognizing the policeman whose stalwart shape barred his way for the moment. "I never saw you until—"

"Your head was in the moon, for a fact, sir! Reckon you've hit a lucky streak, and was counting up your golden chicks—eh?"

Ten-Strike Tom gave a little start, then glanced backward to catch just a glimpse of the iron-railed stone steps marking the Payson place.

"I say, Williamson, is this your beat, now?"

"And has been since the first of the month—yes."

"You were on duty here last night, then?"

The big officer nodded assent, that genial smile fading into something a bit more professional; for surely that subdued excitement, so unusual in one whose steady nerve had almost become a by-word, meant more than showed upon the surface as yet?

Ten-Strike Tom hesitated, but only for a little. He knew enough of this man to feel confident he might be trusted with a weightier matter than even this as yet unexplained vanishment appeared to be.

In as few words as possible, yet making his meaning perfectly clear, Gayworthy told

this officer why he was seeking the information, then bluntly asked him if he had chanced to note such a vehicle at or anywhere near the Payson boarding-house?

Listening quietly, face grave and immobile the while, Officer Williamson gave no sign until Ten-Strike Tom ceased speaking; but then his helmeted head gave a vigorous nod to lend emphasis to his words:

"I did just that, sir!"

"You saw the hack, then?"

"I saw a hack—yes, sir."

"And that hack stopped near the Payson place? Did you see anybody get into it? A lady, that is? Come, man, dear, can't you spit it all out in a lump?" angrily exploded the King-Pin Sport.

But the guardian of the peace was not one to be hurried out of the pace he deemed wisest, and took his own time for explanation.

He had his attention called to the hack, firstly, because it was approaching him at a rate which very nearly passed the limits raised against fast driving. He was getting ready to check if not arrest the reckless driver, when the hack came to an abrupt halt, and a passenger jumped out of the vehicle to greet a lady who—

"Who came from the boarding-house? Why don't you say it, man?"

"Because I'm not so dead sure as you 'pear to be, sir," with a touch of sarcasm pointing his words. "Not seeing the lady come out of that exact house, why would I say she did come out of it?"

"Of course. Go on, please," Gayworthy forced himself to utter, calming both voice and face, putting up with what he could not amend.

Still, his outburst was not entirely wasted. The officer began to realize that this was no ordinary case, and he made quicker work of what else he had to tell.

He spoke of the hasty approach of a second man, who seemed to be on the point of picking a row with the first one, but who ended by getting into the hack with the lady.

"Then they started off, my way, and just as they got even with where I was standing, the lady stuck her head out of the window, to look back, like she'd forgotten something."

"You would know her face again if you saw it, Williamson?"

"I could pick it out of a whole gallery—yes, sir!"

"If I try to describe her face—"

"No need, sir. I've seen the lady who owns that face, time and time again, either coming out of or going into Widow Payson's house."

Ten-Strike Tom made a swift gesture as though in anger, and it was on the tip of his tongue to ask why in something—he hadn't said as much at the start, instead of wasting so many minutes in idle chatter.

But Officer Williamson saved himself by innocently adding:

"And right at the young lady's shoulder I glimpsed another face I can make oath to, sir."

"Whose face was that?"

"A sport who's called Wallace Gilmore, but—"

"What! that infernal—" began Gayworthy, excitedly, but biting his too hot speech short an instant later, to add with forced calmness:

"You are dead sure, Williamson? There is no room for mistake as to the person you saw with Miss Barbour?"

"If I was put on my oath, sir, I'd stick to the same: 'twas Wallace Gilmore, and never any other person," firmly declared the policeman.

Letting that point drop, as though, after all, it mattered but little to him, Gayworthy asked a few other questions, but seeing that he had pumped that well of information fairly dry, he promised to see the officer later on, then turned and swiftly walked away through the night.

Although he was calm enough to all outward seeming, both heart and brain were deeply agitated, and thoughts of anything rather than a peaceful or happy nature were rioting in his mind.

If Officer Williamson had spoken sooth—and he surely talked like one who knew

what he was saying—and that man was Wallace Gilmore, where now was Fanny Barbour?

"How did she form his acquaintance? How did he win her confidence so far that she would trust herself in his company, at night, in a close conveyance?"

"If they were the owners of the faces Williamson saw, whither were they bound? Where did Gilmore leave Fanny? For—surely I couldn't have been mistaken in that fellow?"

"As Ten-Strike Tom asked himself this question, he mentally recalled one of the pictures of that hasty ride over the Leadville trail; brought back the vision of a meeting on that wild and lonely route, where a single horseman was riding toward Leadville, just as hard as he himself was pelting for Denver. And that horseman was—Wallace Gilmore!"

"'Twas he, and I'm ready to swear to that much! Then—where did he leave Fanny? Last night here, in a hack; this forenoon yonder, on horseback! Now—what is at the bottom of it all?"

Almost involuntarily his mind turned back to the mysterious disappearance of Anson Barbour, father to the girl who had engaged his services in an endeavor to solve the strange secret. He recalled the letter last received from Anson Barbour, with its rudely-traced postscript signed "H. K. Jones."

And then—that murdered man, at Leadville! His unexplained mention of that same name, those identical initials! Could it be—

"Have those devils who got away with the father, now decoyed his daughter? Has the killing of Corse Payson got anything to do with this new turn of the cards?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

TRYING TO READ THE RIDDLE.

THESE were only a few sample thoughts, doubts, queries, which flocked so swiftly to the brain of the King-Pin Sport that he had no time left for debating either or deciding any one of them.

The enigma placed before him for solution had been dark and dubious enough at the start, but with this fresh and wholly unexpected complication added, the King-Pin Detective hardly knew what step to take first.

He had turned instinctively toward the Police Headquarters when he parted from Officer Williamson, however, and he did not alter that resolve because of any fresh light which those inward questions had thrown over this latest development.

Thomas Gayworthy had long since formed the acquaintance of the now head of the Police Department, but never until now had he found occasion to cultivate that official in his business capacity.

Still, he felt fairly well assured of a cordial reception, nor was he too sanguine in this belief.

After a greeting with tongue and with hand, the two men took seats, and without preamble Ten-Strike Tom opened his budget.

"I know how fully occupied your time must be, chief, but I've got a little tale to tell which will be sufficient excuse for this intrusion, I have faith. Did you ever hear of one Anson Barbour?"

"I've heard of him, yes," with a half-smile as his keen black eyes glanced toward a poster which hung from the side wall.

"Of course," said Gayworthy, following that glance. "Through those bills, and newspaper advertisements; but I meant outside of that?"

The chief of police shook his head, slowly.

"I understand from some of my men that there is a young woman—daughter, I think—of Anson Barbour in town, now, making some further stir in that direction. I have not met her, nor have I ever seen the man who appears to have vanished mysteriously, to my knowledge."

There was just a suspicion of stiffness in both words and manner, and Gayworthy jumped to the conclusion that the official felt annoyed because he had been almost entirely ignored by the friends or relatives of that missing man, in their search for some clue to his present whereabouts, or to his fate if no longer in the land of the living.

It was a delicate point to touch upon, but

Ten-Strike Tom felt that he must make the effort, else fare the worse.

"I advised Miss Barbour to place the matter wholly in your hands, chief, when she came to me first, through a letter of introduction from my sister, back East. She seemed to think such action might annoy her father, when found, and with one reservation I took hold of the case."

"And that reservation, sir?"

"Was this: I'd do my level best to find Anson Barbour, but if I was to fail, when I'd come to the end of my rope I was to feel free to ask your advice and assistance, chief."

Those hard lines relaxed a bit, and the official bowed his thanks for the implied compliment. Ten-Strike Tom knew the baited hook was fairly gorged, and then he plunged into his subject once more.

"The facts of the case, far as I know them, sir, run like this:

"Anson Barbour left a daughter back in Ohio, at school, and fairly well provided for, far as this world's goods go, though he called himself a poor man. And poor he undoubtedly was, when his position was compared with what it had been before his wife died a few years earlier."

"Barbour came West, like many another man, resolved to pick up a mammoth fortune out here in the mining regions."

"The easiest thing in the world—in one's mind!"

Ten-Strike Tom smiled assent to this murmured sarcasm. Though a jest, it was still a profound truth.

"From what few and wide-apart letters Anson Barbour sent back to his daughter, he found that about correct, chief. Yet he was still bitten by the yellow snake; he still lived in daily hopes of 'striking it rich,' and in each letter he wrote his child he assured her that when she next heard from him, 'twould be to know he was on his road home with a fortune in his pocket for her to spend!"

"That letter was never written, of course?"

"That letter was written, though!" gravely amended the amateur detective, to the evident surprise and growing interest of his auditor, who now began to scent something more interesting than the bare sinking out of sight of a luckless prospector.

"When, and where was it written?"

"In camp, but the envelope bore the Leadville postmark, dated not much more than one year ago."

"And Barbour never followed that letter home?"

Ten-Strike Tom shook his head, negatively. The chief of police shook his shapely shoulders, flinging forth a hand as he said:

"While hardly as tough as it was in the early '80's, Leadville is just a trifle lower than the angels, even to-day, Gayworthy. And one man, especially if he carries any great amount of rocks with him, can disappear without making a very wide ripple on a tide like that!"

"But—did Anson Barbour get as far as Leadville, chief?" slowly, meaningly spoke the King-Pin Sport.

"What do you mean, Gayworthy?"

Ten-Strike Tom answered this sharp query by telling of the rudely-traced lines above the signature of H. K. Jones, explaining the ordinary mishap which had befallen the writer of the letter proper.

"He said that he had found Anson Barbour, and had taken him in to care for until he should be able to resume his journey. Now—did he really 'take him in,' and actually 'do for him?' That's the question which I've never been able to fully satisfy my mind about, chief!"

"Barbour spoke of having made his fortune, you say? Did he mention the amount of wealth he carried with him?"

"Only that he was fetching back ample proofs of his good luck."

"That good luck, doubtless, turned into bad luck, I reckon. You can take your choice between the two horns, Gayworthy: Either that good Samaritan got away with both man and boodle, or Barbour ran against a snag there in Leadville. Either would account for his long silence, but—well, hardly such a solution as the young lady would welcome, eh?"

Ten-Strike Tom slowly shook his head. His own feelings were far too deeply engaged

in this enigma for him to even countenance a grim jest at the expense of either father or daughter, by so much as a smile.

"I'm afraid Barbour has been murdered, for a fact, but that doesn't let me off my bargain; he must be found, dead, if no longer living!"

"And you want my help to find him, of course?"

"If you can afford to lend it, yes, chief. But there's something else I wanted to consult you about before taking any positive steps."

"I was at Leadville, looking around in hopes of striking sign of some sort, when something happened which made me take horse and cover the trail to Denver as quickly as possible."

"I went directly to the place where Miss Barbour boarded, and found that she had gone away, last evening, without leaving word or direction behind her!"

A faint smile crept into that face as the chief of police noted the strong excitement which the handsome Sport was trying to keep under cover, and he quietly asked:

"Was the young lady alone, or did she have company when she took her departure, Gayworthy?"

A hot flush leaped into Tom's face, but he spoke quietly enough:

"It's about that company I want to ask you, sir. What do you know of a young man called Wallace Gilmore, chief?"

That half quizzical smile faded away, now, and the official said:

"Why do you ask me, Gayworthy? What do you know of him, first?"

"Nothing more than that he bears the reputation in Denver of being an all-round sport, concerning whom there are afloat sundry rumors marking him as a bad egg. I never had any close relations with him, partly because he never ran up against me when I was playing on the loose, but even more because I took a strong dislike to the fellow at first sight."

"I'm talking frankly, sir, and for reasons which I believe are good and sufficient, I trust that you will be equally candid."

"Well, Gayworthy, while I can't say that I know of any actually dirty or crooked work on his part, I'm free to admit that we of the force have been keeping an eye out for Mr. Wallace Gilmore. And, to speak very mildly, he isn't just the man I'd select as a fit or safe escort for a young lady."

There was silence after this for a few moments, during which the King-Pin Sport seemed inwardly debating his next words, but when he did speak, 'twas to correctly repeat what Officer Williamson told him:

Although it was but a poor clue to work upon, lacking name of driver or number of the hack, the chief of police promised to set his men at work on the case without further waste of time.

Then Ten-Strike Tom spoke of the killing of Corse Payson, in the Good Luck Saloon, at Leadville, explaining that he had been identified as the son of Widow Payson, landlady of the house where Fanny Barbour had a room.

"Jason Dogood will no doubt send her word, and probably fetch the remains here for burial. You can do as you think best about notifying the mother, chief. And now—what can you tell me about H. K. Jones?"

"Not a word, if you mean the man who added that postscript to the letter written by Anson Barbour. Couldn't you find out anything about him at Leadville?"

The ghost of a smile flitted across the face of the other at this innocent query, for there came to him the memory of those "Siamese Twins" who had so loudly laid individual claim to that title; but the story was too long to tell just then, so he shook his head in negation, and let that point pass them by.

After a few further remarks, none of which call for a record here, Ten Strike Tom left his address where word might be sent him in case anything of importance should turn up concerning the now missing daughter, or the long missing father, promising to drop around in person should he glean any further tidings, then took his departure.

Although he had not actually expected anything better before making that call, Gayworthy felt gloomy and downhearted when he left the office of the chief of police,

and he moved along the pave with a sluggishness very rare in one of his natural disposition.

This queer vanishment of Fanny Barbour affected him far more deeply than he would have believed possible, only a few hours earlier. Then he had felt a strong interest in her welfare, as a matter of course, for was she not the very dear friend of his very dear sister? And—well, in employing him to find her father, she of course included the care of herself, to a certain extent.

But now?

Why was he experiencing such a strange and unusual dread? Why was he feeling such a hot, fierce, vindictive hatred for Wallace Gilmore?

Something of the actual truth came to his mind, just then, but Ten-Strike Tom impatiently strove to banish it. In love? With the woman he had seen only half a dozen times, and with whom he had only spoken of business?

Again the King-Pin Sport tossed his head, much as a restive horse chafes against a galling bit, and by so doing he probably saved his life.

For, just then, a silent-footed shape stole out of the alley-mouth Gayworthy was passing, and dealt a vicious blow with a piece of lead-pipe, striking to stun or to slay; but that head-toss partly foiled the thug!

CHAPTER XIX.

TEN-STRIKE TOM'S FIGHT FOR LIFE.

ONLY for that involuntary head-toss, the King-Pin Sport would have gone down in insensibility if not in death, for his as yet unseen assailant struck to kill.

As it was, the length of heavy lead pipe dealt a glancing blow, cutting through Gayworthy's stiff hat almost as a knife would have done, glancing from the side of his head and expending its vicious force on his shoulder.

The shock staggered him, and for the time-being fairly paralyzed his arm; but Ten-strike Tom kept his feet as he swung dizzily around, his uninjured arm lifting as a guard against other blows.

One was coming, but he who wielded that ugly weapon seemed thrown off his balance by the partial failure of what he counted as a sure "settler," and partly crippled though he then felt himself, Gayworthy was yet able to save himself by combined warding and dodging.

"You devil!" he gasped, fiercely. "What do you mean by—"

His fingers closed on an end of the lead-pipe as he spoke, and he gave it a desperate wrench, just as the thug strove to free his weapon after that same fashion.

The double jerk brought them closer together, and as he yet had no use of his right arm, the Sport lowered his head a bit and dashed it with vicious power fairly into his enemy's face.

A muffled howl of savage rage and pain, then the pipe was lost to them both, flying off into the shadows where nothing less than a groping search could have recovered it.

The thug recoiled, partly from that head-thrust, partly in order to better his own case, and Ten-Strike Tom caught the brief glimmer of polished steel reflecting the rays from the nearest gas-lamp.

"Down him!" came in a snarling cry from the thug, as he crouched to make his own leap. "Slug him, boys! Don't let— Now you have got him!"

Ten-Strike Tom did not stop to learn whether or no these vicious cries meant anything more tangible than a ruse to throw him more fully off his guard, but seeing only that dastardly knave in front, he plunged forward, the hot fire of battle scorching through his veins.

The thug gave a striking thrust at that coming figure, but Ten-Strike Tom shot his left hand in from the side, his fingers closing in a deathlike grip on that bony wrist, forcing the knife-hand aside and letting their own bodies come sharply together.

He tried to strike with his usually good right hand, but that blow had woefully curtailed its powers, and the effort did not amount to much beyond proving to its owner that no bones had been broken, and

that if he could hold his own for a very few minutes, he would have the use of both hands and arms.

He struck sharply with toe, then with heel, catching a lock with the latter which staggered the assassin, and in breaking away from which he lost his second weapon, the knife whirling through the air to fall with a sharp clink and clatter on the stones paving the middle of the street.

"You cussed—I'll blow ye through like a—"

He snatched forth a pistol as he made the savage threat, but once more the undaunted Sport came to a close, grappling with and giving his adversary the heel, this time with far better effect.

Grappling and fighting like wild beasts, the two men fell to the pavement, then rolled over and over until they fell into the gutter, still struggling desperately, the one to kill, the other to baffle.

Once more that quick, sure left hand had caught the thug where he most needed full liberty, and for a few seconds the two men fought hardly for that weapon. Then—the pistol exploded as they wrestled, and a hoarse, mad cry broke from one of the two men!

Not from the lips of Ten-Strike Tom, though, for he broke away from his enemy, scrambling to his feet and recoiling a little as he reached for one of his hidden guns, feeling that further forbearance would be a crime against himself.

But the thug lay there in the gutter, groaning and cursing, making no effort to arise or to renew that death assault!

From no great distance came the sharp rap-rap rap of a locust against the curbstone, and knowing by this that the shot had been heard by the police, Gayworthy crooked a finger between his lips and blew a shrill, far-reaching blast.

The head of the thug lifted at this whistle, and instantly covering it with his pistol, Ten-Strike Tom sternly cried out.

"Steady, you whelp! Lie quiet, or I'll fill you full of holes as a colander! Steady, I say!"

That head sunk down, striking the stones with an audible thump, and the fellow lay without motion, like one either dead or too badly injured to help himself further.

The signal given by the policeman was almost instantly answered by another rap in the opposite direction, and with very little more delay a uniformed figure was sighted by the King Pin Sport, headed his way.

"Right here, officer!" he called out, still on his guard, though the thug lying in the kennel seemed past giving further trouble, and he failed to see or hear aught of the real or imaginary "boys" that villain had called out to. "This way, and—"

"None of your foolishness, now!" sternly called back the patrolman, in warning. "I see you, and I'll club your head until—"

"Flag of truce, both of you, gentlemen!" cried Gayworthy, as he saw the second officer hurrying toward that center. "All I want is for you to take charge of this devil in the gutter. He slugged me, but I reckon he's got a little the worst of it in the end!"

"Wait until we see who—"

"Put on your specs, then, Peterby," cut in the Sport as he recognized the second officer, who had just spoken. "Don't you know me, man?"

"Ten-Strike Tom!"

"What's left of him—yes! Now—mind the cur's teeth! He's been gnashing them mighty lively for a few minutes past!"

Though well meant, that warning proved to be wholly superfluous, for whatever his disposition might have been a short time before, the fight was all taken out of the thug, now.

His body was limp, his limbs all unstrung, and he only gave a low, choking groan of pain and misery as the policeman took hold of his person to ascertain just what ailed him.

"You bored him mighty near the center, Gayworthy!" ejaculated Peterby, as he saw from whence all that hot blood was coming.

Ten-Strike Tom hastily explained how that shot had taken effect, and rightly declaring that his fingers had none of them touched the trigger; the weapon had exploded during the desperate struggle, but whether while the thug was trying to shoot him, or whether

'twas purely an accidental shot, he could never decide.

One point was sufficiently clear: the fellow was badly injured, and unless assistance was lent him right speedily, stood a more than even chance of bleeding to death.

On this decision being arrived at, one of the policemen, with Ten-Strike Tom as assistant, strove to staunch that flow of blood with temporary bandages, while the other officer sent in a call for the patrol-wagon and a surgeon.

The two men had hardly put into use an improvised but fairly effective compress, when an ambulance came dashing up to the spot, and a police surgeon leaped out almost before those bright wheels had ceased to revolve.

He bent over the feebly-moaning wretch, and as a result of that preliminary inspection, declared that the wounded man had best be taken at once to the station, where he could be more conveniently attended to.

"You think he'll stand the ride, doctor?" asked Gayworthy, making a wry grimace as one of the policemen bumped up against his bruised right shoulder.

"Thanks to your care, yes, sir," with a swift glance, then an approving nod. "If you hadn't stopped the flow of blood so neatly, though, it might be a more difficult question to answer."

While the injured knave was being placed upon a stretcher and then picked up to be slid into the ambulance, Ten-Strike Tom and the patrolmen looked for and secured the various weapons made use of by the thug in his desperate assault upon the King-Pin Sport.

"He must have had it in for you terrible strong, sir!" commented Peterby, as Gayworthy asked him to take a good look at the revolver out of which that bullet had been sped.

"Just to make sure, you know," he added, by way of explanation. "Not that I reckon the fellow will ever sue me for damages, but—well, one hardly likes to be credited with killing a fellow when that fellow did the nasty work his own self, you see!"

The ambulance drove off at a quieter pace, bearing the wounded assassin, with the surgeon in charge; but Ten-Strike Tom preferred to walk, especially as Officer Peterby volunteered to bear him company, leaving his mate to hold their beat while he made the report for them both.

By the time they reached the Central Station, whither the wounded thug had been taken, Ten-Strike Tom had very nearly recovered the full use of his right arm, although a painful bruise was on his shoulder, and a far from delightful contusion on the right side of his head remained to recall his perilously narrow escape from instant death.

Plenty of practice enables a man to do remarkably rapid work, and by the time Gayworthy reached the station, Police-Surgeon Ingleby had cared for the latest patient, "doing him up" in true professional style, and was ready to deliver his opinion as to the merits of the case when that query was put to him.

"He is badly injured. The ball passed directly through his body, cutting one of his lungs as it passed. I found the lead lying just under the skin, and cut it out."

The missile showed in the center of his palm as he spoke. Gayworthy looked at it, with a certain degree of curiosity, for he knew that same bullet had been intended for his own heart!

The missile was not much battered, and still retained the marks left upon it as the exploding powder forced it through the rifled tube.

"There's a show for his pulling through, then?"

"A show, yes. With a hole clear through, there is so much less danger of blood-poisoning setting in, you understand?"

When Ten-Strike Tom asked if he might be allowed to view the wounded man the surgeon hesitated, but, at a nod from the chief of police, gave his consent.

The injured thug was lying on a cot, seemingly in a stupor of exhaustion, his coarse, pimpled face showing unnaturally pale under the gaslight.

"Has anybody recognized him as yet?" softly asked Gayworthy, after a brief pause,

during which his keen eyes vainly strove to identify the being who had so desperately striven to send him over the Dark River.

The chief of police bowed assent, speaking in louder tones:

"Yes. I know him for a sort of hobo, or bum. Jake Dobson is the name he goes by, I believe."

At mention of that name the tramp gave a slight start, then lifted his heavy lids, staring half-dazedly around upon those figures.

Moving a little more in front of those eyes. Ten-Strike Tom spoke to the injured man, sounding each syllable with especial distinctness:

"Look at me, Dobson. Why did you try so mighty hard to wipe me out to-night?"

CHAPTER XX.

WINNING A PARTIAL CONFESSION.

Those lids lifted further from those dull, nearly glazed eyes, and the baffled thug gave a barely perceptible start as he appeared to recognize that voice or that face, one or both.

"Why did you jump me in the dark, Jake Dobson?" added Gayworthy, varying his question slightly. "What harm had I ever done to you?"

Those lids quivered, then partly closed, while the wounded thug gave a low, muffled groan, then huskily uttered:

"I was paid to do you up—paid to do you—an' now—whar be I, my own self?"

His head rolled restlessly to the other side, one hand partly lifted, half forming a fist, while he groaned again; but there was a sound almost like a vicious curse in that groan, now!

Ten-Strike Tom looked toward the surgeon as if to ask whether he might press his point further, just then, but before permission or denial could come, the wounded wretch spoke again, in stronger tones than before, although seemingly talking more to himself than to any of those by whom his cot-bed was surrounded.

"Cuss him—double-times-over cuss him! Ef he hedn't egged me on so mighty hot, I wouldn't—wouldn't be like this yer! Cuss him! Ef he was only in the same p'izen fix—ef he on'y was, now!"

"Who egged you on, Dobson?" sharply asked Gayworthy, divining that right now was his opportunity, if at all.

The thug looked up into his face for a few seconds, then lowered lids again, but muttering the words:

"He did—Jones—H. K. Jones paid me!" That effort seemingly exhausted the tramp, for he sunk back on his cot, that hurried breathing suddenly lessening in force and quickness, and he seemed to be drifting off in a stupor.

Ten-Strike Tom looked at the face of the surgeon, who instantly shook his head, negating that request even before Gayworthy could put it into words.

The King-Pin Sport took one of Ingleby's arms, and nodded for the chief of police to bear them company, then drew aside from that cot, speaking in low but intensely earnest tones.

"You heard what he said, gentlemen, of course. And you, chief, know what peculiar interest I feel in this H. K. Jones, as well as how much of importance I attach to locating him past all doubt."

"But if Dobson isn't able to answer your questions, Gayworthy?"

"He is not in fit condition to be questioned further, gentlemen," positively asserted the police-surgeon. "You can see that much for yourselves, surely?"

"He talked readily enough, just now!"

"And might do so again, if thoroughly aroused. But, all the same, gentlemen, I protest against any such experiments. They would surely be at the risk of his life."

Thomas Gayworthy made a passionate gesture at these words, then his strong feelings got the upper hand of him for the minute.

"What is his life worth in comparison with that of Miss Barbour and her father? He is a low-down, worthless thug! The world would be just so much better off without him, and—"

"Granting all that, sir, I hardly know how I am called upon to act as assistant execu-

tioner in this case," coldly cut in the surgeon.

Ten-Strike Tom turned more directly to the chief of police, adding:

"You know better how much there is at stake, sir! Think how Anson Barbour was last heard from while in the keeping of this H. K. Jones. And if he hired this knave to kill me, what were his reasons? Because I have set out to find Barbour, living or dead? Because I am the active agent employed by Miss Barbour, whose strange disappearance I am now trying to fathom?"

"Dobson may have been lying, Gayworthy."

"Why would he lie? Did he look like one lying? Did his voice sound as though he was hatching up a lie? And—why pitch upon that precise name, unless he was speaking solid truth?"

"Your posters, and advertisements have made that name familiar enough, surely!" with a touch of grim sarcasm entering his voice.

There was a brief pause, then Ten-Strike Tom came again:

"That fellow tried his level best to kill me, gentlemen. I foiled his first effort, and could have shot him through heart or through brain before he made another move; but I refrained, although I had but a single arm left me for use, and knew that I was fighting against bloody death!"

"Why didn't I shoot him down, as I would have been fully justified in doing? Simply because I determined to take him alive, to learn from his lips why he was so hot for my life!"

"By his own weapon he was hurt, but does that fact lessen my claim upon the life I spared? No, gentlemen! And now I say—even if it ends in his death: even if by questioning him in hopes of serving or saving a lady, I shorten his lease of life—give me leave to coax or frighten a full confession from those lips!"

The chief of police was evidently impressed by that passionate outburst, and looked inquiringly at the surgeon.

Ingleby shook his head gravely, then slowly spoke:

"I do not say that such questioning will kill, or even shorten his term of life; but I do say that it will be running longer risks than I care to voluntarily assume."

"What matter if it does kill him, just so he speaks first?" passionately cried the King-Pin Sport. "What is his miserable existence in comparison with her—with their good? Not worth thinking of twice!"

"Give him something to brace him up, Ingleby. Make him capable of talking, and if harm follows, I'll cheerfully bear all the blame!"

Won over at length, the chief of police nodded to the surgeon, who raised no further objections, but returned to his patient.

A few minutes later he coldly reported that Dobson was awake, and as fit for talking as he would be for a week, at least.

Warmly thanking the man of medicine, Thomas Gayworthy went to the cot-side, sitting down where Jake Dobson could see him without any extra exertion, then began talking in low but distinct and even soothing tones.

At first he avoided any question which he thought might serve to irritate or to excite the wounded thug unduly; but as he saw how much better the fellow was bearing up under that strain than he had dared hope for, Ten-Strike Tom veered around to the more important subject.

His questions were shrewdly put, and Jake Dobson showed little hesitation about answering them, save when they more directly concerned that human enigma, H. K. Jones.

Dobson told how he had been utilized by one who came to him from "the boss," as he termed that mystic H. K. Jones. He made a full confession so far as the decoying of Fanny Barbour was concerned, frankly admitting that he drove the hack which Bascom Hooper provided for that especial purpose.

"You did this under orders from your boss, you say, Dobson? And that boss was the man called H. K. Jones?"

"Yes. Ef that hain't his right name, I'll never tell ye what it is, nyther!"

"How long have you known this Jones?"

"This year back—mebbe a bit longer, though. I'm not so mighty sure, fer—Durn them bumble-bees! Whar is they swarmin' from, boss?"

He made a feverish stir, and his lids drooped a bit more. Evidently that potion was losing its power, or else his wound was turning him feverish and weak.

Ten-Strike Tom hurried his questions now, fearing lest his main hopes meet with disappointment after all. For, as a matter of course, Surgeon Ingleby would refuse to administer another draught.

But all seemed of little use, so far as trying to individualize H. K. Jones was concerned.

Dobson swore that he had never laid eyes upon the boss; had never even secured so much as a passing glimpse of his face or his figure.

All he knew, and pretty much all he cared for, was that Jones paid his hirelings liberal wages, and never failed to liquidate all claims as soon as they were due or presented in writing.

More than once Ten-Strike Tom felt fairly well assured that Dobson was lying to him on this score, but he tried in vain to trap the fellow; and at length, noting with alarm that growing sleepiness, or that on-coming stupor, he turned his questions more closely toward Fanny Barbour and her abduction.

But, to all seeming, he had dwelt a little too long on that other subject, for, while Dobson talked freely enough, there was a lack of coherency in his sentences, sometimes in his words forming those sentences.

He spoke something about Wallace Gilmore, and then talked a bit of a fight where some person was shot. He mingled this with mutterings about his restive team, about running away and being caught, mixing all up in such a jumble that Ten-Strike Tom vainly tried to make out whether the horses had run away, or whether Dobson was talking of Gilmore trying to escape the snare which closed upon Fanny Barbour by taking to flight.

Tiring of that phase of his half-dreams, Jake Dobson spoke of outrages and of criminal deeds which could hardly have borne any connection with the Barbour case, and it was with increasing difficulty that Gayworthy choked him off that ancient scent and shifted him once more to the trail in which he felt such a burning interest.

There was a gleam of vitality during which Dobson declared that the girl was being conducted to her father, who had to lie under cover through fear of the law-hounds; an assertion which caused the chief and the surgeon to interchange covert glances, and which brought an angry glow to the dark eyes of the King-Pin Sport.

He felt fully assured that so much was a lie, at least, and he began seriously to doubt whether he had gathered anything much save lies!

Still, he persisted as long as he saw a ray of hope lingering, and with intervals of stupor, or sleepiness, which grew more frequent as time passed on, Jake Dobson answered questions or maundered drowsily on, now muttering of the present, now wandering afar in fields of old.

The surgeon interposed, at length, almost sternly forbidding any further questioning, as his patient had already been seriously overtasked as it was.

"Drop in to-morrow, and if I think his situation justifies such an additional risk, sir, you may try it on again. But for now—enough!"

The change of voices appeared to rouse the wounded tramp once more, for he not only opened his eyes but raised his head a little, casting a wild, startled look around him.

His gaze lingered when it came to the face of the King-Pin Sport, and after a brief pause, his coarse features contorted in a low chuckle.

"That's my meat! He's my tarrypin! Look at him moggin' 'long like he didn't keer a cuss, nur never—now! Dodge down the corner an' hump yerself through the alley, fer he's—stiddy, bo!"

"Hyar he comes! Easy—e-a-s-y, Jake! Don't make ary—thar's a heap o' dingbats fer a shore lick like—now!"

He partly raised up on the cot, making a fierce stroke, then falling with a half-laugh,

half-groan, as though his evil task was well done!

"Thar's his karkidge, now fer the boss—clean to Leadville, whar— Git out! You hain't my boss! You're the—oh! oh! oh!" with a gurgling scream as his head drooped. "The devil's got—me—foul!"

Then he lay like one overtaken by sudden death!

CHAPTER XXI.

THE DOVE IN THE VULTURE'S NEST.

"Oh, if I could believe you!"

Fanny Barbour made a passionate gesture, half of anger, half of despair, as that sentence broke from her lips.

Bascom Hooper gave a grimace in return, shrugging his shoulders like one who feels it is hardly worth while to enter into a more elaborate explanation or defense of his actions.

"You have lied to me most shamefully, from the very start! You told me father was—I know you lied, there!"

"How do do you know it, ma'am?"

"How do I know it?" echoed the indignant maiden, with another swift gesture. "How can I help knowing it, rather!"

"All right, if you'd rather have it like that, my dear," said Hooper with another shrug, turning as though to leave the cabin and thus cut short what promised to be a disagreeable as well as profitless interview.

But, woman-like, Fanny Barbour now seemed willing to sue for what she had just scorned, and springing to his side, grasped his arm with nervous energy, crying in shaken tones:

"Oh, sir, I beg of you not to leave me without—my poor father! Where is he, now? You said that I should meet him, and now—I implore of you, sir, tell me how much is truth, how much—a horrible lie?"

That rude shelter was but poorly provided with furniture, but Bascom Hooper took Fanny's arm and led her to a three-legged stool, making her sit down thereon, then drew back a couple of paces before speaking.

"I told you I'd lead you to your father, ma'am, and so I have."

"Where is he, then?" and Fanny flashed a look around that none too clean room, into which she had been brought but a few minutes before, out of a much darker and even less agreeable refuge.

"If not here right now, he soon will be, I reckon," gruffly answered Hooper. "This is the rendezvous he gave me, and I never yet knew the boss to fail in keeping an appointment, whether that was made with friend or with foe."

The maiden gave a slight shudder at this, though it was his tone and manner, rather than the words he used, which lent her that chill.

Somehow Hooper lent the impression that his employer, or "boss," was one well outside the pale of the law, and though she ought to have become fairly well used to this by now, Fanny never heard him without a sickened shiver or an angry protest.

"You have told me all this so many times! So often, yet—unless you are still shamefully deceiving me, why does not my father come? Why does he leave me here, helplessly in the power of such—"

The maiden broke off abruptly, realizing that her passionate tongue was carrying her past the limit of prudence; but Bascom Hooper merely showed his teeth in a grin, clearly caring very little for her good or her unfavorable opinion of himself as a guardian angel.

"Well, though you do doubt me mighty strong, ma'am, I reckon you'll find out in the end that I'm not quite so terrible bad as I might be."

"As for the boss, your father, that isn't for me to say, further than I've already spoken: that it can't be much longer until you can ask him all these questions you've been pelting me with."

"If he is coming, why are you afraid to tell—"

"Because it isn't part of the job let out to me, ma'am," coolly cut in Hooper. "Because I was ordered by the boss to fetch—"

"That title again! Who is your 'boss,' as you term it?" sharply demanded the

maiden, her temper once again flashing forth, hotly.

But Bascom Hooper paid no heed to that interruption, merely waiting until her voice died away, then continuing:

"The boss ordered me to fetch you here, using as little force and rough treatment as possible; but—to fetch you right here!"

"I followed his instructions, and here you are, safe and sound as to body, even though your temper may be a little the worse for wear and tear!"

There was a touch of grim sarcasm in the concluding words, but Fanny paid no heed. Her memory was still too clear for taking note of comparative trifles, and she gave a swift shake of the head, at the same time shrinking away from that villain with strong aversion.

"Now I know you are lying, sir! Never—I can never believe that my father would countenance, much less order, such a barbarous murder as you committed on—poor Mr. Gilmore!"

Bascom Hooper changed color at that, shifting position like one who feels ill at ease all of a sudden. Still, he was not long in finding an answer to suit the occasion.

"You're both right and wrong as to that little incident, Miss Barbour, and when your father comes to give you greeting, I hope you'll not be too vastly overjoyed to think of asking him as much."

"He would deny giving you any such commands, sir!"

"If you put the question in just that shape, ma'am I dare say he would give the reply you're yearning for," retorted Hooper, with another of his sardonic grins. "But, all the same, the boss will uphold me in all I've done—even to the killing of your particular friend, Wallace Gilmore!"

"I'll never believe that of my father, sir!"

"Until you can't help it, better add, my dear! For my orders surely covered all that: covered the killing of a dozen such puppies as Wallace Gilmore, should so many idiots get in the path chalked out for me to follow!"

"The boss sent me to Denver after you, his daughter. I was to win your entire confidence if I could, and as an aid to that end, the boss gave me the locket containing the portraits of his dead wife and his living child: something which had never for an instant left his neck for years back!"

"Does that look as though he had any lack of faith in me, ma'am? Does that even hint that he feared I'd do anything he couldn't and wouldn't back up with his full approval, even?"

"But—not foul assassination!"

"You try to think so, ma'am, but down in your heart you're beginning to see the matter just as it really stands: that in ordering me to fetch you here, where he was to meet his daughter, the boss took all responsibility on his own shoulders."

"Never that!"

Bascom Hooper gave a short, contemptuous laugh, flinging out a hand with real or admirably-counterfeited recklessness as he added:

"All right, and so be it, then! Say that I acted on my own responsibility, so far as that impudent whelp was concerned: what of it?"

"You murdered him!"

"I put him out of the way—or, at least, I thought I did!" with an abrupt change making itself visible in both tone and face. "I had to get shut of him before he could cipher out just where we were bound for and just how we expected to get there!"

"He was too big a fool to take a hint, and too dangerous to kick, so I did the only thing left for me to do: dumped him out, and lifted his roof!"

"'Twas a cruel, needless, barbarous deed!" cried Fanny, shuddering afresh as she seemed to see that helpless form lying so corpse-like there upon the sands, under the pale light of the moon. "And I hope to live long enough to hear that you have paid the full penalty due such a foul crime!"

Bascom Hooper gave a surly, inarticulate growl at this, yet his ugly mood hardly seemed a result of that indignant attack, but rather born of doubts which he had been vainly striving to down, even before Fanny Barbour made allusion to the subject.

"I wish I knew—wish I was half as sure the devil's dead as you appear to be, ma'am!" he abruptly exploded, making a vicious gesture with tightly clinched hand as he spoke.

"I thought I'd made sure work of it, and Parker reported the fellow too dead for skinning! And yet—why hasn't Jake Dobson sent in or brought word, before this?"

Fanny Barbour felt a sharp thrill at this, and a light leaped into her tear-dimmed eyes for the moment.

Was there any real foundation for this fear shadowed forth by Bascom Hooper? Had Wallace Gilmore actually escaped from what had looked like certain death?

If the outlaw saw aught of this emotion, he either misinterpreted its meaning, or else cared naught for her dawning hopes.

"I was a fool for not taking the trouble to examine his carcass my own self, but—surely Parker wouldn't lie to me? No! He was dead! Only—that cursed idiot! It's odds Dobson's got into trouble over hiding that carrion!"

Bascom Hooper, looking strangely troubled for a man of the iron nerve he had displayed hitherto, stamped his foot and swung his clinched right hand viciously.

Fanny Barbour shrunk back a little, beginning to fear for herself in case his vicious rage should turn her way; but then Hooper suddenly paused, bending his head in acute listening, as his eyes turned toward the front of that rude cabin.

Fanny caught no sound which could account for this change, but the ruffian sprang agilely to the door, giving one swift look outside, then, as though he had seen something to more than justify his fears of interruption, he turned and with a pantherish bound reached the side of the startled maiden, one arm swinging around her waist, his other hand closing almost savagely over her parting lips, his breath coming hot and foul against her face as he hoarsely muttered:

"Not a word—not a whimper, girl! Make so much as a weenty yelp now, and I'll be the death o' ye!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A WARNING FROM THE DENVER TRAMP.

COMING from without that mountain shanty, a sharp whistle blended with the savage threats so hotly breathed by the ruffian, and frightened though she surely was, Fanny Barbour realized that this whistle was a warning meant for Bascom Hooper.

That palm closed more firmly over her lips, effectually hindering any outcry on her part, while the powerful arm about her waist hurried her nearly off her feet and across the room to the rear of that cabin.

"Make a single sound and I swear by all the fiends of Tophet you shall never lay eyes on the face of your father again!" harshly whispered Hooper, as he was forced to free her lips in order to go further.

Stooping, he swiftly lifted a cunningly-masked trap-door irregularly set in the rough flooring, and holding the maiden for an instant over the dark cavity thus partially revealed, he hastily added:

"Go back to your place, girl! I haven't time to take you clean there, but you know the way, and—if you stop to listen, girl, I'll be the mortal death of you!"

That whistle rung forth again, this time with impatient sharpness, and like one who dares not lose further time, Bascom Hooper suddenly relaxed his grasp upon the maiden, permitting her to sink through that trap-hole, then dropped the door over her head.

Fanny dropped only a few feet, and those were rendered less dangerous by the steep steps touched by her feet.

She knew just what to expect, for Bascom Hooper had, only a few minutes earlier, brought her to the mountain shack by that very route, then lighting their passage with a candle, which he did not extinguish until both had passed upward through that ingeniously-arranged trap-door.

Still, frightened by that sudden change in her chief captor, and as yet untempted to disobey his commands, the maiden moved along the narrow passage-way which had been dug out of the earth, pausing only when at the point where that tunnel opened into a larger space, likewise the work of human hands.

Her own eyes had told her something of the truth, and Bascom Hooper had shown no desire to make any mystery of that part of the adventure: this was really an old mine, deserted by its original owners when the once-promising vein of mineral they were working suddenly "petered out," leaving them with nothing more valuable than blasted hopes and "a hole in the ground" to show for all their labor and expense.

Other hands had built that rude cabin, close up against the foot of the hill below the ledge from whence the original locators had driven their shaft; and he who built that refuge, made it doubly secure against "accidents" by contriving a masked tunnel connecting cabin with workings.

By means of this secret passage, as Bascom Hooper took pains to explain, he who owned that mountain shack might be besieged by the bloodhounds of the law, but he could never be captured so long as that "back door" remained in good working condition.

Something of all this came back to Fanny Barbour as she reached the secret door which parted tunnel from shaft, and though her outstretched hand was fumbling for the fastening, her fingers did not immediately open the barrier.

Why was Bascom Hooper so earnest in his warning against her pausing beneath that trap-door to listen?

He had spoken in seemingly good faith when he declared that Anson Barbour would surely come to visit his daughter that very day. Then—could it be that her father's approach had caused this sudden change?

It hardly seemed possible, since Hooper said he was taking Fanny to the cabin expressly to meet her long-missing parent; but the maiden was too sorely shaken in wits to reason acutely, and only lingering long enough to open that masked door, so she would have nothing to check her speedy retreat in case such a movement should prove necessary in order to escape discovery by those she meant to eavesdrop, the maiden stole noiselessly back to those dark and contracted quarters beneath the rude mountain shack.

Even as her groping hands touched those steep steps, Fanny caught the sounds of earnest voices coming from the room above her head, and she knew she was too late to note that greeting between Bascom Hooper and whoever it might be whose visit had caused such commotion.

Crawling up those steps, the maiden paused with one ear nearly touching the trap door, fairly holding her breath at first in her eagerness to catch, and, if possible, to recognize those voices.

She still hoped that one of the speakers might prove to be her long-missing father, although his coming there, particularly if on friendly terms with yonder murderous villain, would say little for his honor or manhood.

Without taking in the full sense of the words spoken, at first, Fanny strove solely to distinguish the tones, feeling sure that she would have no difficulty in recognizing the voice of her parent, even though more than half-a-dozen years had elapsed since she last heard Anson Barbour talk!

One of the two speakers was plainly enough Bascom Hooper, but the other was not—surely that voice belonged to an utter stranger?

Her heart fell as Fanny was forced to reach this decision, and with her hopes banished, she might have stolen away from that trap-door without gleanings of actual information, had not the strange voice distinctly pronounced a familiar name: that of Wallace Gilmore!

Closely following the name came a sharp, savage oath from the lips of Bascom Hooper, then his words:

"A lie! An infernal lie, I say! Didn't I see where my lead—"

"May have creased, but certainly failed to bore!" coolly cut in he of the unrecognizable voice.

"I know better, though! I blew daylight clean through his shallow pate! I saw where—and Parker! Didn't he look, to swear there was a hole through his skull big enough to ram my fist through?"

Bascom Hooper spoke like one determined not to believe himself innocent of actual

murder, but his visitor proved just as persistent on the other side.

"Parker saw with his elbows, Hooper, or else—would he lie to you on purpose, think?"

"Parker? No! Why should he want to lie to me?"

"That's what I was asking you, pardner."

"No reason at all, and that's why I say it again: Wallace Gilmore was laid out too cold for skinning!"

"So you believed, Hooper, but, all the same, the whole kit of you were fooled, and mighty badly fooled at that!"

"I just can't make it come that way, pardner!"

"You've got to, though, Bascom," persisted the messenger. "Wallace Gilmore is not only alive, but he is—"

"Easy, mate!" once more cut in the chief-knave. "What was Jake Dobson doing all this time? Didn't I tell him to plant the carcass where it would be safe from discovery?"

"I reckon you did, pardner, although I wasn't there, so have to take your word for it. Still—"

"Was Jake selling me out too, then? Is that what you mean?"

"Don't think it, Hooper!" hastily cried the other rascal, while the listening maiden shrunk back a bit, so viciously wicked was the tone assumed by yonder evil villain.

The man named gave vent to a curse of angry impatience, then said:

"What else can I think, then? I must have been mistaken as to my shot, though I'd willingly have made oath my lead bored his skull through and through! Parker must have lied to me when he swore I'd opened a tunnel through that fool cabeza! And now—Jake Dobson sell me out!"

"In place of selling you out, Hooper, it's Jake Dobson who sent me here, fast as horse-flesh and human endurance could cover the trail between Denver and Leadville, with the warning you refuse to credit. I've delivered my message, and now—so long!"

There came to Fanny's ears the sound of turning steps, as though the messenger was about to take his departure, irritated at receiving naught better than curses and unbelief as reward for his long, rough and wearisome jaunt.

"Whoa-ap, old hoss!" sharply exclaimed Bascom Hooper, his footfalls telling Fanny how he sprung forward to arrest that offended partner in evil with hand as well as with voice. "Don't kick over the traces all at once, now! Give a fellow time to—Dobson sent you, you say?"

"Of course he sent me," with lingering resentment perceptible in his sulky tones. "Pure love wouldn't bring me, d'you reckon, Hooper?"

"Not while you look and talk like that, pardner," grimly retorted his host with more placable tones. "Cool down a bit, and when you quit sweating under the collar—"

"Wasn't it enough to make a fellow sweat—say?"

"Call it so if you like, and consider my apology made in due form. Now—how about this Wallace Gilmore, cully?"

"Well, Dobson looked me up in a terrible sweat, and bade me get ready for a hot chase against time while he posted me as to what had turned cross-ways. Then he explained how it all came about."

"He said that, just as you ordered, he drove off with Gilmore inside his hearse, going to a spot he had picked out in his mind as the best and easiest place for an amateur sexton to plant his game."

"Hurry it up a bit, can't you?" growlingly asked Hooper.

"Ain't I? Well, Jake swore he dumped the carcass into the ditch, and covered it well over with sticks and brush, weighted down with a few big dornicks to make all more binding; then—"

"Why didn't the infernal idiot finish the planting off-hand?" viciously growled the other knave.

"Because his team was mighty uneasy, and because there was nothing near at hand to cover the rig from sight in case any person should be out on a moonlight tramp in that direction. See?"

"Go on!"

"Well, there isn't so mighty much more to tell. Dobson drove back to town and got

shut of his team, then looked up tools for making a regular planting of the corpus, hurrying back yonder to get it all over with before daylight came to show what sort of trick he was turning."

"Only to discover that some one had found the body?"

"Either that, or else Gilmore had come to life and crawled out of what was fully meant to be his final resting-place," said the messenger from Denver. "That scared Dobson mighty nigh out of his rags, but he had to make the best of it, and, looking me up, sent a word of warning here to you, post-haste."

"Why didn't Jake come himself?"

"Well, maybe 'twas partly because he didn't care to face your guns until you'd time to blow off some of your steam, but he gave a braver reason than that: he wanted to guard against Gilmore's making any more trouble at that end of the line, and swore that if the Sport should turn up there, he'd fit him for a wooden overcoat though he had to wear a hempen collar himself as penalty!"

"Talk's mighty cheap!"

"I know it, but Dobson seemed in dead earnest, for once. Still, he seemed to think that Gilmore would be more apt to hurry off this way, to look after the young lady."

"If he tries that on, I'll make a surer job of it this time!" declared Bascom Hooper, with a savage oath.

A low sound, as of a smothered chuckle, startled Fanny just then.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AS THOUGH RISEN FROM THE DEAD.

THAT sound seemed to come from close behind her, and it was with the greatest difficulty that the maiden smothered a cry of terror, which must surely have brought yonder ruffians that way in hot haste to discover who was playing eavesdropper.

Her first, and most natural, thought was that one of the lawless gang who seemed to regard Bascom Hooper as a leader had stolen in upon her from the abandoned workings, and that chuckle was but preliminary to the clutch which would close upon her person.

Although she strove so hard to smother all sound, Fanny made noise enough to reach the ears of him who laughed, for there came a hasty whisper in warning from the utter darkness close behind her perch:

"Silence, Miss Fanny! It's sure death if you betray my presence to those villains! I'm Wallace Gilmore!"

Guarded though that whisper was of stern necessity, the voice was recognized by the maiden even before that name was pronounced, and the double shock was so great she would have fallen from those steep steps and almost certainly made noise enough to alarm the enemy, only for the friendly hand and arm that came to her support there in the darkness.

"I have found you—thank Heaven for that!"

Subdued as to volume, but wholly unlimited as to ardent meaning, the young man spoke thus as he held that trembling form closely to his breast, turning away from the steps from which Fanny Barbour had first learned of his escape from death.

His warm breath fanned her cheek, and then—was it wholly through accident?

Fanny gave a low, gasping breath as those mustached lips touched hers, and with a sudden effort, slipped far enough from his embrace to touch the ground with her feet.

"I must—you should not—"

"Sh-h-h!" Gilmore breathed in swift warning as other sounds came to their ears from the cabin above. "If those villains should take the alarm too soon, I'd be powerless to save you from their evil clutches!"

"Do you wish to hear more, or shall I lead you back to where we can talk with less fear of being overheard?"

"I don't—it really is you, Mr. Gilmore?" falteringly murmured the bewildered maiden, hardly able to put confidence in the evidence of her own senses, as yet.

"Does my voice sound so strange, then, here in the dark? Shall I run the risk of striking a match—why not?" with a trace of recklessness coming into that voice. "Even should they espy—"

"No—oh, no!"

"Your wish is my law, Miss Fanny. Shall we go back? One word from your lips will mark out my course, remember."

Rallying a little from the surprise of meeting the man whom she so surely believed she had seen brutally murdered that moonlit night just outside of Denver, and beginning to realize not only the deadly peril which Wallace Gilmore would have to encounter in case discovery came while they were in those contracted quarters, but how vastly this friendly presence improved her own chances of escape, Fanny moved away from the spot where she had been listening to those knaves, softly saying:

"We will go—back this way! Carefully! If they should hear us now! Better take my hand, sir, until—"

As though there were eyes at his fingertips, Wallace Gilmore found that hand and clasped it warmly. He even took the lead in that utter darkness, just as though he was familiar with what lay before them!

Some such thought occurred to Fanny Barbour, but she did not bring it forth, just then. She had been inspired with a dread of yonder lawless knave, as strong as it was of sudden birth.

Not until they safely passed by the masked door which concealed the tunnel leading from cabin to workings of the old mine, did Fanny draw a full, free breath.

"Thank Heaven! those villains did not—what are you doing, sir?"

Half-scared was that query, for her present companion had drawn a match briskly across the rough face of a stone forming part of that irregular wall, the faint crackle sounding dangerously loud, the bluish spark seeming perilously brilliant just then.

"Trying to exorcise the ghost of your lingering doubts, Miss Barbour," lightly answered Gilmore, holding the tiny torch where its light most perfectly revealed his features, smiling genially the while. "Now—am I myself, or am I some rank impostor, dear friend?"

Fanny gazed eagerly into the handsome face thus revealed, her pulse beating swiftly, her heart giving an unusual leap as she took note of the white bandage which could not be entirely concealed by the soft hat the adventurer now wore.

"Hardly improves my beauty—ahem!" Gilmore whispered as the match burned down to his fingers and was cast aside. "But if a scar should remain, I'll never try to mask it, for—'twas given me while I was honestly striving to serve you, Fanny!"

There was no trace of jesting in his tones, then. Instead, he seemed so intensely in earnest that the maiden shrunk away, half-frightened, and powerless to make answer for the time being.

A brief silence, then Wallace Gilmore spoke again, in more ordinary tones:

"You heard those rascals discussing my escape, Miss Barbour, for I caught something of their chatter myself, though I was further away from the sounding-board than you were."

"Yes, I heard, but I could hardly believe!" murmured Fanny, still feeling strangely shy of the man who seemed bent on again devoting his life to her service.

"I couldn't help laughing in my sleeve when that scoundrel, Hooper, made his savage threats," with a low laugh that recalled the sound by which Fanny Barbour had been so thoroughly startled. "If he could only have seen who was listening to those threats!"

"He would murder you—just as he tried to kill you that night!"

"Well, he'd doubtless make an effort that way, but whether he'd do the job up any browner, or whether he wouldn't go down himself—that's the question!"

Those words came lightly enough, but Fanny gave a shudder as she heard them. Back of that seeming carelessness lay a deadly meaning, too dark for mistaking: if those two men ever came together again, Fanny felt that one or the other must surely perish!

Although they were again in utter darkness, Wallace Gilmore seemed able to read faces as well as tones, and once again he abruptly changed the subject which, however natural it might be, could hardly add to his good-standing with the maiden.

"Come, Miss Fanny," he said, in guarded

tones, reaching forth and securing her nearest hand. "The best is good enough, goodness knows, but you surely would be a bit more comfortable were you back in your old quarters, where—"

"How came you here, sir? How have you learned so much, unless—"

"Unless I am playing partners with your hosts?" he supplemented, with a low, amazed laugh. "Well, that's part of my story, and you can listen to that better when furnished with a fairly comfortable seat."

"And then," as though that was a mere afterthought, "there will be less risk of our good host Hooper running in on us, prematurely!"

Gilmore led the maiden through the passage to what had been her quarters ever since Hooper brought her to that wild, remote region, and when Fanny was seated in fair comfort upon a couch of furs and blankets he spoke briskly enough:

"Those fellows hit pretty close to the right solution of my escape from a premature burial, Miss Fanny. I was merely knocked senseless by Hooper's shot, and was partially conscious when Jake Dobson dumped me into the ditch for 'planting.'"

"Still, I wasn't in fit condition for making a fight of it, and had he not thought best to get shut of his rig before regularly burying me, I hardly think I'd be here now!"

"When he was gone, I worked my way out from under the brush and got back to town without any difficulty, aside from my natural dizziness and weakness through loss of blood, and because of the blow my brain had received."

"I had thoughts only for you, only for your safety, Miss Fanny, and hardly waiting to have my wound looked after, I took saddle and started for Leadville, feeling nearly certain that there, or thereabouts, I stood the best show of striking the trail of your abductors."

"But how—it seems so strange to think you could find me here!"

"I know, but that's too long a story to narrate, just now. Hooper may come back here at any moment, and— Well, while I'd ask nothing in life better than a fair chance to play even with that brute, until I can feel you are safely out of this—"

"How can that ever be, sir, when those villains bar the way?"

"How did I manage to get in here, Miss Fanny, unseen and unsuspected by yonder knaves?" asked Gilmore, with a low, amused chuckle. "And surely where I have gone once, I can go again—with you as my companion!"

"You mean to say—"

"That there is a secret passage leading into this old mine, through which I mean to guide you to freedom once more, Miss Barbour! And now I must say why—"

He broke off abruptly, like one who has heard sounds of approaching danger, and after a brief silence, he swiftly whispered:

"Somebody's coming this way, dearest! Try to mask your feelings until— Have courage! Keep a stout heart, and I'll save you from those scoundrels though it costs me my very life!"

Wallace Gilmore pressed her hand warmly, then dropped it, to hurry away through the darkness, just as a ray of light made itself perceptible.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A BOLD STROKE FOR FREEDOM.

THAT light came from the direction of the mountain shack, and Fanny had no difficulty in divining the truth; Bascom Hooper was coming back to give some more or less plausible explanation of that interruption.

Such proved to be the case, so far as the bearer of that light was concerned, and Fanny quickly made out the bearded features of the plausible villain who had so adroitly decoyed her out of Denver.

In one hand he bore the candle with which he had lighted their passage to the cabin, and holding it over his head for a freer glance around as he came to that chamber, or enlargement of the main shaft, Bascom Hooper a moment later stuck the taper into a rude contrivance made for that express purpose.

Lent courage by the knowledge that a true friend was hovering near, ready at any mo-

ment to come to her aid should the necessity arise, the maiden betrayed far more nerve than would have been at her command after the words she caught under the cabin.

"Well, you are not mortally offended, Miss Fanny?" asked Hooper, with an affectation of gayety. "After all I might just as well have let you remain above deck; but that whistle might have meant danger by far too great for one so precious to be exposed to it!"

"It was a false alarm, then?" Fanny forced herself to ask, with admirably assumed composure, though the task was nearly too great for her. "There was no one coming?"

"No one? But there was, though!" with a low chuckle. "A messenger from the boss, warning me to have all in readiness for a visit."

"The boss?" echoed the maiden, her eyes flashing now.

"Your father, Anson Barbour then, my dear. He will be here this very night, and then—"

"Will he come as a prisoner, like me?"

Bascom Hooper gave a start, the rays of the candle showing a bit of additional color in his face at that sharp query. But he rallied as swiftly, speaking half-impatiently, half-pityingly:

"A prisoner? Don't you think it, even for an instant, ma'am! A prisoner? Why, my girl, don't you even yet realize that your father is our boss, our leader, our chief?"

"That is a monstrous lie, and no one knows it better than you do, Bascom Hooper!" indignantly cried the maiden, turning away from the evil knave, resuming the seat which she had abandoned at his approach.

"If you're not crazy— But there!" he exclaimed, checking those angry words by an evident effort. "I'll bear with you yet a little longer, Miss Barbour, but I'll be mighty glad when I can turn you over to the safe-keeping of your parent. For once in my life I've got a big plenty!"

"Why are you so desperately hard to convince, Miss Fanny?" he asked after a brief silence, during which he seemed undecided whether it wouldn't be the better part of wisdom to beat a retreat and leave time to work its own cure. "Why can't you put faith in my words?"

"Because your speech is nothing better than a tissue of cunning lies!" sharply retorted the maiden.

Yet, boldly though she spoke, her face turned very pale and her lids drooped shivering over her eyes; for just then she caught sight of a phantom-like figure stealing noiselessly up behind the outlaw, and she knew that Wallace Gilmore was coming to—do what?

"I'm telling you the sober truth right now, at any rate," coolly asserted Hooper. "That interruption was caused by the coming of a messenger from Anson Barbour, your father, my chief, stating his intention of coming here this very night! If you don't believe—"

That sentence was never finished!

Wallace Gilmore had crept well within striking distance, and rising up from that crouching posture, he flung an arm around Bascom Hooper's throat, forming a smothering garrote, at the same time lifting a knee to bore sharply into the small of his back as he jerked the outlaw viciously backward, whirling him around as they both dropped together, Gilmore adding his full weight to that heavy fall!

Once—twice!

His right hand, clasping what seemed to be a heavy chunk of quartz, rose and fell twice in swift succession, each blow resounding dully, yet causing Fanny to shudder and gasp with sickening horror.

Springing to his feet, Wallace Gilmore dropped that rudely effective weapon in favor of a brace of revolvers, glaring fiercely into the shadows as though more than half expecting a rush of enemies to follow that brief struggle.

But nothing of the sort happened. There was no sound to tell of immediate peril. Not even a groan came from the lips of Bascom Hooper as he lay there, half in light, half in darkness, seemingly so soon sent across the Great Divide!

"Courage, Fanny!" the victor cried, in subdued but fiercely exultant tones, as he saw the maiden cowering there on her rude

pallet. "All is well! Everything is coming our way, now!"

The maiden dropped her hands, with which she had involuntarily tried to shut out that awful sight, and with a shuddering glance toward that motionless shape, she gasped:

"He is not—you haven't— Oh, sir!"

"Oh, he's all right, barring a bit of a headache something akin to the one his bullet gave me," declared Gilmore, unblushingly, yet like one who deemed it wisest to fall in with her humor for the moment. "But I will truss him up so that he can't howl too soon, nor too loud, for our safety!"

Stepping over to her couch, Gilmore took possession of a blanket, which he coolly proceeded to cut and tear into strips suitable for his purpose, all the while speaking with considerable animation.

Very likely it was his idea as to how he could best restore the nerve Fanny had lost.

"I didn't mean to down him so soon. I'd rather have put it off for a few hours longer, when it would have been night on the outside, as well as night in here. But—well, I feared the rascal intended to take you back to the cabin, and once in yonder I'd stand no show at all, save by making an open attack and fighting against long odds!"

With the strips of blanket thus provided, he bound the outlaw, hand and foot, slipping a bandage over face and lips by way of a gag, although one who had received two such fearful strokes with the chunk of quartz, must be in poor condition for raising an outcry!

And, while lifting and dragging the body over to a dark corner of that earth-chamber, Wallace Gilmore took good care to cover that head and face with a fold of the blanket, so that Fanny did not once catch so much as a glimpse of either!

Covering the body over with another blanket taken from the pallet, Wallace Gilmore paused in a listening attitude, presently giving vent to a sigh of intense relief, followed up by a long inhalation of air.

"So much for so much! And though we have met again, 'tis Bascom Hooper whose name has changed to Dennis!"

Fanny sighed and shivered. It was all so awful, all so horrible! If she was only safe back in her comfortable home once more!

And yet—her long missing father!

The same thought seemed to strike Wallace Gilmore, for he said:

"Of course Hooper was lying when he said your father sent word to expect him here this evening. We heard what sort of message that fellow brought, and—if he should take a fool notion to follow Hooper down here? Or—the rest of the evil outfit?"

Fanny sprang to her feet, forgetting all minor thoughts in her wild longing to escape forever from that awful den, from those lawless hands, from—ugh!

"Take me away! Oh, sir, take me away from this, before that horrible—I seem to see him looking at me, showing his teeth like—I dare not stay here any longer!"

"Nor shall you, dear girl!" quickly asserted Gilmore, an arm catching her waist as the maiden sprang further away from that hidden yet too distinctly-seen corpse. "I'd heap sight prefer night as a cover, but we'll try the secret passage right away, to make sure it isn't closed upon us by those devils—if they should miss Hooper!"

With arm about the trembling maiden, lending her much-needed support, Wallace Gilmore left the dimly-lighted earth-chamber, hurrying on until at a point only a few yards from where that other masked door concealed the narrow tunnel leading out to the mountain shack.

Pausing here, he fumbled in the dark for a few seconds, then gave a low ejaculation of grim pleasure as he succeeded in opening a second barrier, even more ingeniously masked than that other.

"This is the way I got in," he explained in a low but distinct whisper while groping their way slowly along what was evidently another tunnel, similar in shape to the one by means of which communication was had between cabin and mine, only considerably longer than that one.

"I happened on it through a lucky chance. I saw Hooper seemingly dive into the solid

hill, and then investigated, later on. Now—we are almost at the mouth, Miss Fanny!"

"And then?"

"Well, unless guards have been placed there since I last came in, we will find very little difficulty in giving Hooper's devils the slip for good and all!"

"The entrance, or the exit, rather, is not visible from the cabin, it being on the further side of a shoulder which—but you shall see it all for yourself, my dear! Now—silence, on your life!"

A few paces further brought them to the exit, and after listening for a brief space without hearing aught to alarm, Wallace Gilmore grasped Fanny's wrist, stepping through the narrow opening to—

Not to safety, but to be pounced upon by a number of armed men, who yelled in savage exultation as he went down before their vicious rush!

CHAPTER XXV.

THE SIAMESE TWINS APOLOGIZE.

ONCE again in the saddle and covering that long and difficult trail as only a good horse and a better man could.

Once again both horse and rider showing signs of the severe strain to which they had been subjected, but now their destination was close at hand, for yonder showed the first signs of the great Carbonate Camp; that "Magic City," Leadville.

With only a few absolutely necessary halts, Ten-Strike Tom had ridden all the way from Denver, meeting with no adventure worthy of note by the way, sparing neither himself nor his faithful steed, for he felt that he and he alone could save Fanny Barbour from a fate worse than death itself.

And now, just when he was beginning to congratulate himself that his forced journey had reached its immediate ending without aught to delay or to endanger, his keen eyes caught sight of moving shapes which he instinctively recognized as enemies.

Swift as thought his hands dropped to the pistols at his hips, the good horse veering sharply aside in obedience to that pressure of his knees; but before even he could go further, a deep-toned voice cried out in peaceful accents:

"Don't shoot, boss! It's flag o' truce, an' all han's up at this end o' the alley: see?"

A corpulent shape waddled out into the stage-road alongside of which it had been waiting in seeming ambush, followed from the opposite side by a tall, awkward, shambling figure, both lifting their unarmed hands above their heads.

"Steady, therel!" sternly called forth the King-Pin Sport as his guns rose to a level, the silver beads covering the strangely-matched pair with deadly celerity. "I'll send a lead-drift through ye both at the first hint of trickery!"

"Jest so ye don't do hit h afore, yer 'Onor!" squealingly cried the taller fellow, squirming uneasily, yet still holding his ground in spite of those physical tremors.

"Which it'd be bloody murder, sir, boss, yer Honor!" rumbled the corpulent claimant, with equal haste of tongue. "Fer we're jest waitin' hyar fer to make our 'umble 'pologies fer bein' sech dug-gun chumps ez to even reckon we mought—ef you on'y could contrive fer to shift the dangerous end o' them 'ar howl-twisters t'other way for a bit, boss!"

It was easy enough for Thomas Gayworthy to recognize those human obstacles in the trail, and as his memory flashed back to the night of their first (as well as last) meeting, what more natural than to think the brace of knaves had waylaid him thus for the ugly purpose of "playing even?"

But now, as they faced him out of cover, flinching visibly from his trained guns, yet so clearly bent on securing a parley, his momentary anger faded away, and he could even smile at both present and past.

"Flag of truce is all right enough when civilized creatures hold it up, but when fellows of your caliber—"

"Hyar's a Krupp, an' yen's a 'tatur pop-gun!"

Henry Kane Jones grinned broadly as he made this apt comparison, and Ten-Strike Tom felt more like laughing than frowning as he recognized the whimsical jest.

"I'd ought to fire you both, but—what is it you're after, anyway?" he demanded,

lowering his pistols a trifle, but still on his guard against possible treachery.

"Fu'st, we ax to 'pologize fer tryin' to play ye all over dirt, back yender a few nights," briskly explained the corpulent claimant, now more at his ease.

"Don't mention it, I beg!" and Ten-Strike Tom smiled at the memory thus brought back. "Seems to me I fared about as well as either of you, that scrape!"

"An' a dug-gun sight better, or mebbe we wouldn't be so red-hot fer to 'pologize," half humorously, half doleful. "Fer why? Beca'se we didn't not on'y hev fer to stan' thar like clogs hitched to the durn tail of a durneder donk' ontel broad daylight, but then—go 'way sick hens!"

"Rotten-begged—ho, my!" squealed Hamilton King, nose going up and stomach contracting at the awful memories thus revived. "Don't ye talk, 'Arry! Hit makes me— Ow-augh!"

"Git into the bresh ef ye want to make a holy spectacle out o' yer ugly self, critter!" sternly reproved the corpulent member. "Ye done tuck yer sweet dose then like ye was a little bob-tailed lamb, an' ye shorely didn't ought fer to turn outside in now!"

"Made a couple of omelettes of you, did they?" laughingly asked Ten-Strike Tom.

"Which I wouldn't 'a' felt so mighty much like kickin' over ef the 'gredients hedn't bin so dug-gun too old!" candidly avowed the fat man. "But never mind lookin' back at jest that thar pictur'; me pard, hyar, hes the 'pepsia so turrible bad that ary little thing the like o' that 'fects his stomach all upside down!"

"Well, what more do you want of me?" demanded Gayworthy, with an abrupt assumption of his former sternness. "You surely can't expect me to whip the town to wipe out their insult toward you Siamese Twins?"

"Durn the town, jest so we kin collar 'nough rocks fer to git us well out of it!" bluntly spoke the fat member, with a wave of his hand.

"Am I expected to pay for the blessed privilege of your delightful acquaintance, then?"

"Waal, not onless ye raally reckon ye'd orter," generously answered Harry Kane. "Still the way we is fixed, jest now, the idee is like this: small favors thankfully 'ceived, an' bigger ones a mighty sight mo' so!"

"Out on a begging tour, is it? Well, I'm opposed to mendicancy, on principle, which lets you gentlemen out: understand?"

The fat man drew back with an assumption of dignity that would have been superb, had it not been ridiculous!

"That's your mistake, sir, but not our treat! We hain't come out hyar on a beggin' 'petition, nuther. We're playin' it squar', on the dead level, sir! An' so—this is the why o' the whichness!"

"This is me, Harry Kane Jones. That is me pard now, Hamilton King Jones. We both see a big reward offered fer somebody which has them precise ee-nitals as we both owns. Wharfo' we both—"

"Bite it off short, please," crisply interpose the King-Pin Sport, anxious to get on to his destination, yet with a growing curiosity as to what fresh kink these oddly-matched partners had picked up.

"Which is jest what I'm a doin' of right now, sir, boss, yer Honor, the werry best I know. An' so, ez I was a-sayin'—what was I sayin', aryhow, dug-gun ye, Ham?"

"Has 'ow we two gents wanted for to hearn that reward, hof course, ye bloomink idiot, ye!" piped the tall member, disgustedly.

"Fer findin' the H. K. Jones ye wanted wuss then ye did us—that's it, fer a honest fact!" declared Harry Kane, with a vigorous nod. "An' now, boss, air ye willin' to pay 'cordin' to the information a critter fetches ye, that-a-way?"

"What have you learned since I saw you last?" evasively came the answer.

"That aigs hain't al'ays aigs, fer one thing," with a grin. "But that don't count. Ef you say—Durned ef I don't run the resk, as atween gent an' gent, sir!"

"We come hyar lottin' on gittin' big pay fer bein' named ez we was named. We wasn't the right critters, but we made up our minds fer to find out who was, an'—"

Waal, I reckon we kin putt ye onto the right trail, boss, ef— Ye ketch on?"

"Hif ye makes hit worth hour trouble, sir!" cried out Hamilton King.

"How am I to know that this isn't another of your crooked tricks to down me, for good, though?" dubiously asked the Sport.

"Would we stoop so low as to play— But that don't count!" said Harry Kane in a hurry, as he caught that sneering smile at his choice of words. "An' so, to prove it to ye—we'll show ye the goods afore we even ax for the pay!"

"Which ha gent hof h'onor wouldn't stoop so low has to cheat hus, hanyway," rather feebly squealed the tall member, evidently thinking of the bird in hand, yet hardly daring to openly object just then.

"I ketched the first clue 'long of talkin' 'bout the feller who got his last sickness that night in the Good Luck. I made out he'd bin sort o' workin' fer a queer ole critter livin' out in the hills, some'r's, who was knowed by the mighty few which knowed him at all, as Daddy Markle."

"I've heard of him—yes," quietly observed Ten Strike Tom.

"Hev ye ever bin to his shack? Hev ye ever see'd what I hev sawed; that inside the cabin thar is cyarved with a knife onto a beam, the same dug-gun 'nitals which ketched we-uns into sech a squabble? Did ye ever see them names: H. K. Jones?"

Forth rolled these sentences with wondrous volubility, at first deep and sonorous, then gradually rising until the final query issued in a lingering squeal which would hardly have shamed the gangling member of that speculating firm.

But instead of being stricken with joy or amazement, Ten-Strike Tom yawned until his palate was visible to those protruding eyes. Then he gathered up the loose reins in his left hand, its mate still holding pistol, more as though the Sport had forgotten to return it to its regular resting-place than as one who still fears some treacherous assault.

"Is that all?" he asked, languidly, after that yawn.

"Good Lawd o' everlastin' glory! Hain't it plum enough, then?" the fat member ejaculated. "Hain't I tellin' of ye that—"

"I suppose so, but what of it all? I've no longer any desire to discover the original H. K. Jones, because what value he once held, has vanished past recalling. Still, should I ever conclude to look deeper into his case, I'll bear you gentlemen in mind. Until then—ta-ta!"

Ten-Strike sent his horse once more toward Leadville.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE KING-PIN DETECTIVE'S PLEDGE.

THE good horse took only a few paces before Ten-Strike Tom turned in the saddle, hand resting lightly on revolver-butt, though he hardly anticipated having to put the weapon into actual play.

Still, there were angry sounds coming from the spot where he had ridden between the two bummers whom he had facetiously dubbed the Siamese Twins; words of anger, oaths and curses both hot and heavy!

"All it lacks is a clothesline and a couple of tails long enough to knot together! Wouldn't they make a beautiful reproduction of the Kilkenny cats, though!"

For the two bummers were facing each other there in the middle of the stage-road, both talking, both gesticulating in anything but amicable mood, just as though each was charging the other with having ruined their last hopes of gaining a strike out of that complicated H. K. Jones affair.

"They'll get down to pulling hair 'fore long, I reckon!" muttered Gayworthy, slackening lines again and letting his good steed take his own pace once more. "It'd be a circus well worth watching, and if I had more time to spare—but I haven't!"

As he rode on toward the now near town, Ten-Strike Tom's final glimpse of the "Siamese Twins" showed them still disputing, still making furious gestures, but not yet worked up to the fighting pitch!

Thomas Gayworthy rode directly to the livery-stable where he kept his horse while

in town, and bidding the hostler pay especial attention to the noble animal, making fairly sure his wishes would be respected by leaving a liberal *douceur* in that honest if rather dirty palm, the King-Pin Detective hurried on to his hotel, where he was quickly refreshing himself with a sponge-bath and a change of clothes after his long and arduous ride.

This done, he stopped at the hotel office to inquire for letters, but finding none, he ate a fairly hearty supper, then put on his hat and sallied forth like one who has some particular destination in view.

That destination appeared to be somewhere among the saloons, for Ten-Strike Tom went the rounds, glancing in through the unmasked doors of some, in others crossing over to the bar, asking for a cigar, then taking advantage of the slow-burning match to ask the attendant whether Vince Purkiss had been around that evening?

If the answer came in the negative, as it nearly always did, he asked where would be the next most likely place to look for that gentleman?

For a time it really seemed as though Gayworthy would have to sample about every brand of cigars in Leadville, for each attempt ended in failure to find the man he sought, and each hint given him while the barkeeper was making change, proved worth nothing at all.

Still, Ten-Strike Tom rarely took a notion into his head without fairly carrying it out to the end, and he made up his mind to find Vince Purkiss if he had to run all Leadville through a colander.

Then, as so often happens, chance gave him the reward denied to persistent system; he met his man face to face, just emerging from a darkened doorway, back of which in all probability was running a "skin game" of faro, for the "square" dealer had no occasion to close his doors or to hide his light from all mankind.

"Hallo! You're the very man I've been searching for, all over this blessed village!" briskly saluted the King-Pin Sport, grasping the hand of the tough between both of his own, working it pretty much as a sailor works the brake to keep a wooden bottom under his feet.

"That's all right—ef it is all right!" surlily growled Purkiss, as he recognized the one who greeted him with such unusual warmth. "But mebber you'll show the papers fer it all, boss?"

"And you, too, my lad?" cheerily added Gayworthy, recognizing that faithful shadow just behind Vince. "How goes it, Daniel?"

Dan Mixon gave an inarticulate growl in response, one hand hidden near his middle, evidently ready to back up his pard in anything which might come to the surface. If Vince Purkiss snarled, he felt in duty bound to growl!

"What is it you want of us, Ten-Strike?" demanded Purkiss, surlily. "Ef I pulled a gun on you that night, back to Patsy's—"

"I'm not kicking about the gun, Purkiss, my boy; and as for the rest—how is our mutual friend, Patsy McCarthy? And—Biddy?"

"Durn Biddy! An' Patsy—waal, he's stuck fast to his bed ever sence. I made sure he wasn't playin' bugs onto me; he did smash his hind leg all to thunder, that very mornin'. But I'm still keepin' case onto the durn whelp, an' when he do git out, onto his own hoofs—"

"May I be there to see the holy circus?" ejaculated the King-Pin Detective, then altering his jovial manner a bit, now that he had fairly broken the ice and scattered that surly reserve to the four winds.

"But Patsy McCarthy never gave you that pair of beautiful black eyes, Purkiss! And—wouldn't you like to play even with the fellow who did turn you end for end, though?"

"Try me on! Jest try me on, an' see fer your own self whether I would or I wouldn't!" viciously snarled the tough, his hands turning to fists, his athletic form quivering from crown to sole with poorly repressed rage and longing for revenge.

"You wouldn't mind running a bit of risk to get that same chance, would you, Vince?" slowly asked Gayworthy, keenly scanning that face as dimly revealed by the light of the full moon.

"You jest p'int him out, an' I'll git him—I'll git him ef he stan's right in the middle o' hell itself!"

With indescribable hatred came those words, and his last doubt vanishing, Ten-Strike Tom added:

"Well, the chances are that I can point out your game to you without descending to the regions of brimstone and sulphur, Purkiss. Of course you can't well expect me to take all that trouble on my own shoulders without getting some slight pay back?"

"Name your price, and I'll pay it back ef I hev to work on the chain-gang!"

Ten-Strike Tom laughed, softly, at this natural inference, then said:

"My pay needn't come in hard cash, Vince, but in kind: I'll serve you, if you'll serve me. What do you say to that?"

"I'll say done! Jest so you give me your word that you'll show me the dirty cur as blacked the two eyes o' me when I wasn't lookin'!"

"Well, this is hardly the best place in the world to form an alliance. Will you come with me to my room? And—how about Mixon?"

"Whar Vince goes, thar I go 'long," quietly answered the pard for himself. "That's what, pard?"

"You bet yer sweet life!" was the emphatic rejoinder; then adding in quieter tones: "That's the way of it, Ten-Strike. When it comes to a split, him 'nd me's jest one knot past splittin', but when it comes to hot work or a nasty fight—waal, then we're a couple that's gin'ally ekil to half a dozen. See?"

"And right glad of it, too!" frankly admitted Gayworthy, as he moved off in the direction of his hotel. "I thought one good man would be enough to back me up in the little job I have in view, but two good men are so much the better!"

"An' the dug-gun cuss who belted me in the peepers, boss?"

"I'll show him to you, never fear, pardner!"

Nothing happened to delay or hinder their reaching the hotel, where Gayworthy ordered a bottle and cigars sent up to his chamber, to which refuge he then guided his guests.

When the liquor was fairly sampled, and the weeds ignited, Ten-Strike Tom began to more fully open his budget, seemingly frank and open as the sun-lit noonday, yet adroitly holding in reserve the most important points.

It was not that he entertained any actual doubts as to the perfect good faith with which the two pards had pledged him their aid and services in return for the information he promised to impart at the proper moment; but he was not yet fully certain as to their ability to keep a close lip.

"There's just this much about it, friends, which you don't want to overlook; we may have to burn powder, or redden steel."

"Which we kin do ef we hev to, I reckon. Eh, Dan?"

"That's what!"

"Why don't you ask whether we're going with or flatly against the law?" asked Gayworthy, with a slow, half-smile while keenly watching the faces of his recently won allies.

"Whar's the use?" almost indifferently asked Vince Purkiss, in turn. "You're gwine 'long, hain't ye?"

"Of course I am!"

"Waal, right thar you hev it, I reckon. Eh, Dan?"

"You're mighty right, pard!"

"Fer what's good 'nough for you, is plenty good fer us. Ef you're willin' to bust the law wide open, why should we skeer off? See?"

Ten-Strike Tom laughed heartily at that bluntly honest speech, so strongly contrasting with the crooked morals it indicated.

Still, it was just what he would have wished for had the choice been offered him, and his hands went out to be clasped by those of the inseparable pards.

"That's all right, then. You are to follow my lead, to strike as I bid you, to kill if nothing less will serve. On my part, I'll promise to do my full share of the work, and not to shirk my portion of the hard blows 'n case it comes down to fighting."

"An' you're to give me a fa'r show fer playin' even with the dirty cuss as jolted me, that night?"

"Yes. I'll show you your game, and even help you bring it to bag! Now—good-night, boys! Go get what sleep you can, for I'll expect you 'round here, bright and early in the morning, ready to take to the field."

"We'll be on deck, don't you worry we won't, now! Come, Dan!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE ARCH-PLOTTER SHOWS HIS HAND.

THERE was little more than a show of fighting when those rough-clad fellows pounced upon Wallace Gilmore, for their very weight was enough to crush down a far more powerful man, particularly when caught entirely off his guard.

There were oaths and curses mingling with the blows and the brief struggling, but Fanny Barbour could neither aid her guide nor herself, just then; one of the knaves made a dive past his mates, to grasp the maiden in an unflinching grip.

"Whar's the use, anyway, pritty?" he cried, moving further back into the secret passage, but pausing where he could hear if not see. "The young squirt hes ketched his craw-full, an' ef he hedn't, hyar's a full gun whar'd fetch him up eendways ef so be he was to make a bulge a'ter you ag'in!"

Little risk of such a rush coming, though!

Fanny could hear the ruffians as they laughed amid their cursing, and even so quickly she knew Wallace Gilmore had more than he could do to defend himself.

And yet, even then, his thoughts turned her way, his sole desire seemed to be that no further harm might befall the maiden!

"Don't hurt—let her go, if—kill me, but—"

Brokenly came the words, but Fanny caught their full meaning, and a scream of mingling fear and pity broke from her lips.

"Don't hurt the gal, Jingles!" harshly warned a voice from just outside that tunnel. "The boss'll chaw us all to rags ef ary harm comes to her, ye want to mind!"

"The gal's all right; how's your boy?" half mockingly called back the fellow in whose grasp Fanny was lying, almost fainting.

"Done ketched him in a hopple—easy, boys! 'Tain't killin' jest yit, onless the boss wants to make it that way him own self!"

Like one drawn by curiosity, the fellow called Jingles moved nearer the adit, giving a low, grim laugh as he peered forth to see Wallace Gilmore lying on his face with a stalwart knave astride of his back, both hands briskly adjusting stout bonds to the arms and wrists of the conquered adventurer.

"D'ye see them 'ar, my pritty?" he asked, with an ugly leer on his uglier visage, as he shifted the position of his captive so she could get a clearer view of that scene. "Oh, he hain't croaked—jist yit!" he added, as the poor girl gave a low, shuddering sob.

Drawing back once more, Jingles added:

"Thar's the way doin's pritty much pan out when they reckon to go buck up ag'in the boss, ye want to know, honey! Them as thinks they kin is dug-gun shore fer to find out they didn't ca'n't, don't ye see? An' so—waal, ef you hain't jist a plum' fool fer the lack o' good sense, gal, you'll sort o' b'ar that much in mind when the time comes fer ye to stan' up afront o' that same boss—'deed, yes, ma'am!"

Glibly came the sentences, just as though he who uttered them had given the matter careful thought; but if Fanny heard, she gave no signs to that effect.

Hardly a minute ago she had been so full of hope, so well assured that escape from those evil clutches was all but won; and now—all was lost!

"Rack out with yer dainty duck, Jingles!" came from the owner of that coarse voice without the passage. "Fetch yer lame duck along, lads! A mighty purty pa'r they 'be, too!"

Jingles lifted the hardly conscious maiden in his arms and moved back toward the mine proper, followed by the rest of the evil gang, two of them bearing the bound form of Wal-

lace Gilmore, one at his head, the other at his feet, while the third and last knave acted as master of ceremonies, or general utility man.

That loathsome clasp, the whisky-laden breath which fanned her face, both combined to arouse the maiden, and rallying her powers once more, she managed to touch feet to ground as she pantingly cried:

"Don't—I'll walk! I will not be carried like— I can walk, now!"

"That's all hunky, and walk she goes!" promptly acquiesced Jingles. "Ef 'twas jest my own sweetness I was totin', I'd hang on like grim death to a dead nigger! But now—Siddy by jerks, ma'am!"

Although it was intensely dark there in that subterranean passage, none of the outlaws experienced any difficulty in making their way along the adit, thus proving their perfect familiarity with the place.

Jingles was first to gain the earth-chamber where Wallace Gilmore had so dexterously disposed of Bascom Hooper, and there confronted a dark-garbed shape, over whose face was fastened a cloth mask, thus most effectively disguising his identity.

"You've got them both, then?" asked the masked man, in deep, almost hollow tones as he looked beyond the first comer.

"Got 'em all two both, boss," promptly answered the fellow, ducking his head and scraping with one foot as he drew a trifle back from the maiden whom he had conducted hither.

"An' Gilmore?"

"Let up, ye devils!" cried that worthy for himself, voice choking as with intense passion. "Let up, I say! I'll answer for myself, if you—let up, ye whelps of Satan!"

"Not dead, that's fairly certain," observed the Mask, with a short, disagreeable laugh at that vicious outbreak.

"No, but you will be, if ever I get a half-show!"

"That will do; take him back to the dump," coldly ordered the chief knave, waving a gloved-hand as though monarch of all he viewed.

The four fellows quickly fastened upon that vainly-struggling figure, hurrying past their chief to vanish beyond the circle of light cast forth by that candle.

Fanny, left standing alone for the moment, fell back against the earth-wall, shivering as with a mortal chill, yet facing that enigma in black like one striving hard to identify fact with fancy.

Who was this being? Surely not one of those who had brought her all the way from Denver to this solitary retreat? Surely not—would or could a father act like this?

"No! never!" broke almost unconsciously from her pale lips as her hand pressed tightly over her madly-throbbing heart. "He is not—I'll never believe him my—never!"

"Would I make such a rank failure as a true and loving parent, then, my dear?" sneeringly asked the Unknown, readily interpreting her meaning. "Would it prove such a dreadful shock, the knowledge that I was Anson Barbour?"

"You are not— He is a gentleman, while you are—"

"Never spoil a neat sentence because finishing it might cut through a too sensitive hide, my dear!" mocked the Mask; but then his tone and manner swiftly changed, hardly for the better.

"Enough of this folly, girl! It is high time your eyes were opened to the truth, and—I'm the only man living who can make that entirely clear to your comprehension!"

"'Twas by my commands that you were brought here from Denver. Bascom Hooper was my prime agent, and— What are you looking for?"

At that name, Fanny involuntarily glanced toward the door of the earth-chamber where Wallace Gilmore had hidden the body of that agent; but she could see no signs of it now, though yonder lay the very blanket with which Wallace had covered that form from her sight!

"Looking for the gentle Bascom, are you?" sneeringly asked the Mask as he followed the direction taken by her eyes. "Well, have patience yet a little longer, and you may meet the gentleman—in this lower world, too, so don't shudder!"

Fanny made no answer. She was too thoroughly shaken up, too greatly agitated for easy command of her vocal organs.

"Never mind about Hooper, though, Miss Barbour; you have enough to think about, without that. Now—listen to me, if you please!"

"The time for lying, for soothing words, for temporizing with the naked truth has gone by. From this moment on, we'll do our work without hiding under cover."

"You are not altogether an idiot, Miss Barbour. You are wise enough to realize that no one would go to all this trouble, would run so many and such great risks, simply to humor an idle whim, or to gratify a mere caprice. So—this is plain business, girl!"

"I am the man who plotted and planned all this intricate work; and why? Open your ears, and I'll give you an abundance of light, my girl!"

"I needed a stronger lever than any I had so far been able to find or to use. So—I thought of you, and so I sent my tools out to gather you in! They obeyed, and here you are!"

"For what particular purpose, do you ask? To deal the final blow which will break down the too-stubborn will of an infernal fool who—"

"My father?" huskily panted the maiden, shrinking yet strangely attracted toward that masked enigma. "You have—tell me of my poor, dear father, sir!"

Just then the four knaves came back from disposing of Wallace Gilmore, and paused as though for further orders.

"You left him securely bound, of course?" asked the mask.

"The same way you saw him, boss."

"All right. Jingles will wait with him. The rest of you go back to the shack and keep an eye out against intruders from that quarter. Go!"

The four knaves obeyed, and once more Fanny was left with the Unknown, who spoke sharply to her a few seconds later.

"Can you fully realize it all, girl? Do you know that unless you listen to reason and yield to the inevitable, you will sign the death-warrant of Wallace Gilmore, not to mention Anson Barbour, your father?"

"My poor father! Tell me—where is he? Oh, sir, where is he?"

"Beside his grave, from which your hand alone can hold him back!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"YOUR MONEY OR YOUR LIFE!"

THE Masked Chief lifted hand to lips and gave a shrill whistle at this juncture, and at the signal Bascom Hooper came into view from the further gloom, his head rudely bandaged, his hands gripping firm hold of a manacled figure which he rudely shoved along ahead of him, into the circle of light.

Fanny Barbour gave a low, shuddering cry as she stared at this man: so like a vision just risen from the grave!

His emaciated form was clad in rags and tatters. His hair and long beard were tangled and thickly frosted with silver threads. His face itself was gaunt with hunger and deeply lined by the tortures which had been measured out to him with a ruthless hand in the struggle to break down his indomitable will.

The very personification of wretchedness and privation, yet—through it all there shone the iron nerve which had fought so bravely against terrible odds for more than a long year!

One wondering, doubting, pitying look, then Fanny Barbour uttered a shrill, piercing scream, for recognition came to her in spite of the sad change which those horrible months of almost unceasing torture had wrought.

And as Bascom Hooper fell back in obedience to a wave of his masked master's gloved hand, the daughter sprang forward, to clasp arms around the neck of her long-missing father!

On one side stood Bascom Hooper, a sardonic grin contorting his thickly-bearded visage, on the other was the Masked Chief, arms folded over his prominent chest, eyes gleaming like twin coals of fire through the slits in his face-covering.

Fanny sobbed and moaned, half in delirious

joy at finding the parent for whom she had mourned so long, half in terror lest that meeting should prove to be fatal to the loved one.

She could not forget the threats uttered by those hidden lips, nor could she ignore that ominous presence.

For a few brief minutes thus, studying first the tearful face of the maiden, then striving to read the full emotions of the father, who showed a wonderful degree of nerve under the shock of that meeting; for if he had been so ruthlessly tortured by this demon in human guise, how much worse might be the fate awaiting this innocent maiden?

Then, as though he felt the proper time to deal his next blow had come around, the Unknown spoke, sharply:

"I promised to bring father and daughter together in life once more, but neither of you seemed to fully credit my assertions. Now—you have met, you have greeted, and it is time for you to learn the full penalty attached to this reunion, unless—unless you come to my terms!"

"You merciless devil!" huskily panted the father, vainly striving to free his arms so that he might at least make a show of shielding his beloved child from that villain. "For myself I care naught, but for my child—harm her, and I'll kill you by inches!"

His arch-enemy laughed coldly, sneeringly, flinging out a gloved hand in utter contempt of that fierce but impotent rage.

"The will is yours, but the power is mine, Anson Barbour! If any dying by inches is on the programme, that role must be filled by yourself! You have already experienced something of that, my fine fellow! Shall I grant you time in which to explain all its delirious joys, its mad ecstasies to this, your one pet ewe-lamb, Anson Barbour?"

"You devil! Why don't an offended God blast you as you stand?"

"Because he's gone out of the blasting business, no doubt," sneered the Masked Chief, laughing shortly as though the bare idea amused him hugely. "But we're talking of earthly, not of Heavenly powers, my dear friends, and so—listen, please!"

"This is the last call, Anson Barbour! This is my final attempt to break down your infernal obstinacy, and in order to make it as effective as possible, I have gone to greater expense and incurred more risks than will ever be wiped out unless—unless I carry my full point!"

"I'll never give up! I'll never bend, though you may break me!"

Like one who has repeated the words until they become a matter of rote Anson Barbour pronounced these two sentences. And yet, with that dear form trembling on his breast, her arms about his neck in loving clasp, how could he avoid feeling a sickening horror of what was yet to befall them both?

"So your lips say, Anson Barbour, but your face gives them the lie!" You know now what a mighty power I've won, and how surely that power will be exercised to the utmost, unless you give way, now!

"For more than a year—for nearly fifteen long months I have held you in my grip, able at any instant to squeeze the last spark of life out of your obstinate carcass! At any day of all that long score, I have stood ready and eager to give you back to the world, to the liberty you pined for, only asking one thing in return: your golden secret!"

"You surely have learned to rightly judge my power, by this. You certainly know that what I say, that I will do. So—I tell you in speech too plain for misinterpreting, Anson Barbour—give me your money, or I'll have your life!"

Fiercely, viciously came these threats, and with a shuddering moan of growing fright, the maiden buried her blanched face still deeper in the bosom of her helpless parent.

If looks had power to slay, death would have claimed yonder masked demon then and there! But that was all poor Anson Barbour could do.

"Do you understand, you obstinate, surly, bull-headed dog?" still more viciously cried the Unknown, leaning a bit nearer those two, his eyes glittering like those of an enraged snake the while. "It's your money or your life! It's yield to my wishes and live; refuse, and perish like a dog! It's death for you,

Anson Barbour, and it's even worse than death for your dainty daughter!"

Anson Barbour gave a hoarse, savage cry at this diabolical threat, vainly striving to burst his bonds, but the Masked Chief sprang forward and grasping Fanny with gloved hands, forcibly tore her from that long-lost and now surely-doomed parent.

At the same instant Bascom Hooper rushed forward to close muscular arms about the body of the prisoner, holding him still more helpless.

"Now, girl," harshly added the Unknown as he held the maiden in a close clutch despite her frantic struggles to break away. "Now, girl, it comes your turn! Win your fool father over to telling just where he has buried his golden store, or he shall die by inches, and an even worse fate shall be yours! Now—come to my terms or the band begins to play!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

TEN-STRIKE TOM ON THE TRAIL.

"THAT'S the very place we're looking for, boys, but while those fellows are lurking so near, I hardly reckon we'd better make a break for our wants!"

"Unless— Is any one of 'em my meat, boss?"

"Neither one of 'em, Vince, so keep your linen on, please!"

Thomas Gayworthy was the first speaker, and the second, as a matter of course, was the Denver tough, Vincent Purkiss, while close at the elbow of the latter was his inseparable, Dan Mixon.

The trio, clad for roughing it and armed to the teeth as men arm who knowingly enter upon a campaign where they know the chances are vastly in favor of hard fighting where a man's hand must keep his head, were crouching under good cover, only a few hundred yards from the spot where a number of men could be seen in waiting.

There were only four of these fellows, and though they were fully armed and looked as though they might be as willing to use their tools as bear them, the odds alone were not sufficient to hold the King-Pin Detective back, like this.

If necessary, or had he deemed it advisable, he would have charged a force thrice as strong with a smile on his face and a jest on his lips; but just now—there was something more to be considered than the mere love of fighting for fighting's sake.

"You don't reckon them cussed critters is watchin' fer us, boss?"

"Well, hardly! If watching for us, Vince, wouldn't they keep a bit closer under cover? No," with a thoughtful frown darkening his handsome face. "They're guarding the secret drift I told you about; but why they should— Look!"

A sudden stir among yonder knaves drew forth that hissing ejaculation, and the three adventurers watched what was yet to come with more than common interest.

They caught an indistinct glimpse of a human being just emerging from that vine-masked adit, then saw it literally buried beneath three of those armed watchers, cries, oaths and jeering laughter coming in a curious jumble across that little valley to the ears of the watchers.

Vince Purkiss gave a sharp, eager breath as he saw this vicious scramble, then quickly muttered:

"Shell we mix in, boss? Shell we lick daylight out o' the whole durn outfit?"

"Steady, mate!" warningly spoke Ten-Strike Tom, a hand gripping the nearest arm of the born fighter. "Follow my lead's the orders! Don't— Holy smoke!"

For just then there came faintly to their ears the scream of a woman in great terror or distress of body, and like a revelation something of the truth flashed upon the King-Pin Detective.

"Fanny! It's she—caught while trying to escape yonder devils! If— Too late—too late!"

Never in all his life had Thomas Gayworthy met with a severer test of his nerve than right now.

He fully believed that scre m came from the lips of Fanny Barbour, drawn forth by finding her hopes of escape from those evil clutches were vain.

His whirling brain held a picture of her

struggling in the rude grasp of one of those burly ruffians, while yonder, to add to her distress, vainly fought the man who had thought to share her flight; the man who—and he was—could it be her father, the long-missing Anson Barbour?

Yet Ten-Strike Tom could not only hold himself back from the rush to the rescue, but could restrain his eager comrades as well!

For one thing, the lay of the ground was wholly against them, just then. They were crouching under good cover, but that cover was on the slope opposite that masked tunnel, and they would have to charge across fully three hundred yards of open space, each rod of which could be wholly commanded by the outlaws with their guns.

And then—even so soon Ten-Strike Tom could see that the unequal fight was ended: the man who had first ventured from that adit was overpowered and being bound.

"We kin jest knock the socks off 'm, boss!" muttered Purkiss, gripping his Winchester like one who fairly longs to begin the racket on his own account. "We kin punch every dug-gun one of 'em chuck-full o' holes afore they know what's broke loose!"

"You bet we jist kin, too!" chimed in Dan Mixon.

"Wait! Wait until I give— Too late!"

Thomas Gayworthy's hands were holding himself, now! Although he was wise enough to see the absolute folly of attempting aught on behalf of those two unfortunates just then and just there, it required his sternest self-control to refrain from breaking cover and rushing upon those lawless knaves.

As he repeatedly said, it was too late to chip in with any hope of helping Fanny Barbour and her (to him) unknown companion in misfortune, while any rash move on their part would surely result in putting the enemy wholly on guard, if it did not result in anything worse.

And so the Ten-Strike Sport lay under cover, watching yonder villains as they completed their capture, then lifted that bound form from the earth to which it had been crushed by their weight of numbers, bearing it feet foremost into the hill.

"Jest like they was totin' a corpus!" grimly muttered Vince Purkiss.

When the little party vanished entirely from view, Thomas Gayworthy drew a long breath as of relief, letting his tensely-strained muscles relax for a brief space, his keen eyes roving once more over the scope of country spread before the trio.

Not for very long lasted this survey, for Ten-Strike Tom had already made a pretty thorough scout over the most of it, but he was collecting his cooler thoughts, as well.

"You're ready for work when I say so, mates?" he asked, quietly.

"More'n ready, boss. Eh, Dan?"

"You bet your life!"

"Good enough! You two fellows will wait here for the present, while I take a little circumbendibus to get at the hole, yonder. I'm going to follow those rascals, if it takes a leg off!"

"An' us, too, boss?"

"Not yet," decisively. "You'll keep that hole covered with your Winchesters until I pass through it. If any fellow shows up, playing trap to my rat, and I don't smoke him first, then you can salivate him to save my hide. Otherwise you're not to make a break, not to make a sound, nor to show so much as the tip-end of your nose out of cover. Understand?"

"I reckon, boss; but it's dug-gun tough orders, all the same!"

"It is orders, all the same, though, and I expect you to follow orders to the very letter, Purkiss. Now—all ears open, both of you!"

"I'm going in yonder, to find out just how the land lies. You'll wait here until I'm out of sight for—call it five minutes. Then you can steal down nearer the hole, but keep outside of it, unless I call."

"How'll we know it's you, boss?"

"I'll make racket enough so you can't well mistake," with grim emphasis. "If you hear me shoot, or call, rush inside as quick as the law allows, and act according to your best judgment."

"If you neither hear nor see me inside of two hours—well, you can know I'm either a prisoner to yonder thugs, or else have taken a final trip over the range!"

"Which we'll play even, boss, ef it's the last thing we ever do!"

"Some day, but not right now, pardner. If I miss coming back inside of the two hours, you fellows must rack out lively, heading for Leadville, where you'll spread the news all over town, and call for volunteers for a back-trip. Hurry right here, then—do what you like with the devils you may find, but take good care of Miss Barbour and her father!"

Without pausing to give either of his allies a chance for further expostulations, Ten-Strike Tom stole swiftly yet cautiously away from that lurking-place, shaping his course so as to win yonder masked adit with as little loss of time as might be, while still keeping in view the wisdom of covering that same advance from possible watchers.

CHAPTER XXX.

"HOW WILL I DO, GOOD PEOPLE?"

Up to that moment Fanny Barbour had seemed nothing more than a scared, trembling, woe-crushed girl, afraid even to meet those evil-glowing eyes; but with that harsh speech came a sudden change.

She turned from father to enemy, face flushing and eyes flashing with hot indignation, mingled with scorn and contempt.

"If that band could play your dirge, I'd gladly join in with my voice, you vilest of all vile scoundrels!"

"What? Not only a tongue, but the tongue of a genuine virago, tipped with venom!" mocked the mask, yet clearly taken by surprise in spite of that swift assumption.

"I wish it was! I wish my touch was the rankest of all poisons! How cheerfully would I spring to your arms, you execrable villain!"

Fanny hardly knew what words passed her lips just then. She had been wrought up to the pitch of madness by that pitiless demon in human guise; and now, forgetting all prudence, forgetting how terribly yonder Unknown could avenge himself on the helpless prisoner whom he had held under his relentless thumb for so many months of unceasing torture, she thought only of showing the monster how intensely he was loathed.

With her first words she had broken from the gloved hands which tore her away from her manacled parent, and the Masked Chief made no real effort to retain his clasp, simply moving far enough so he could, if he deemed fit, check the infuriate girl in case she should try to rejoin her father, who was now fast-gripped by the muscular arms of Bascom Hooper.

Laughing contemptuously, the Unknown made a slight gesture which caused Hooper to relax his clutch and fall back to his former position. Then the arch-schemer moved aside himself, motioning Fanny to join her father if she saw fit.

With a choking sob, the maiden took advantage of that permission, heeding not, if she suspected the truth—that their enemy calculated on that arm-clasp to again weaken her womanly resentment.

He sounded a sharp whistle, which was presently answered in person by Jingles, to whom the chief spoke:

"Fetch Wallace Gilmore this way, my man. Pity to talk twice when once going over can serve for all!"

The silence lasted through the brief interval necessary for Jingles to carry out his instructions. The chief seemed willing to let that loving embrace work to his advantage, and neither father nor daughter were any too well fitted for speech, just then.

Jingles had set free the feet of his captive, but thongs were still knotted at wrists and at elbows, while a handkerchief was bound over Wallace Gilmore's mouth to serve as a gag.

His bare head was roughened, his face showed marks of hardly dry blood, but the young man was able to stand alone, and had walked, on his own feet, to that death-chamber.

"You can stand aside, Jingles," commanded the Mask, with a wave of his hand toward the spot where Bascom Hooper now stood in waiting. "If I need you, I'll let you know in good time."

Fanny lifted her face from the bosom of her father as she heard that entrance, and a faint sound, half-groan, half-sob came from

her pale lips as she recognized her companion of that luckless attempt at flight.

"One more unfortunate!" mocked the Unknown, ready as ever to enjoy the suffering of others. "Still living, my dear girl, but whether his life lease runs much further, depends pretty much upon your will!"

"Upon my—I don't understand you, sir!"

"I'm going to brighten that understanding right now, my dear!" the voice growing harder, even more pitiless if such a thing could be. "Listen well, all of you, for I've brought the trio together that once telling might serve every purpose."

He paused, those glittering eyes roving from face to face as though their owner sought to learn each one's weakest point before making his actual attack.

"To make everything clear as we proceed, my dear friends, let me briefly allude to Anson Barbour and his unfortunately fortunate find!"

"He fell into my power when I was a fairly honest citizen, as the world goes nowadays. An accident to his starving broncho crippled him to some slight extent, and, like the good Samaritan, I took him in—and now I'm going to do for him!"

"He paid me well for such little services as I could render him; I freely accord him that credit! But, he very foolishly told me how wondrously lucky he had been, after so many years of hard and poorly-rewarded labor; he said that he had stumbled upon a vast gold-field, until then wholly unsuspected by any of the vast army of prospectors for the twin metals silver and gold."

"He showed me his little store of dust and of nuggets; just a fair sample of the enormous treasure which he had securely cached near the scene of his recent labors, meaning to leave it there until he could return in fit condition for conveying it safely to Leadville. And then—but I've said enough!"

"Anson Barbour's letter, with a postscript added by my hand, signed with the name I had not used for years upon years, had gone past my recovery; but Anson Barbour's person—ah! that was mine, now!"

"You pitiless demon!" hoarsely cried the captive prospector.

"Ay! how pitiless you shall know right now!" with a still more vicious energy entering his muffled voice and glowing forth from those twin holes in his sable mask.

"I've thousands of times sworn to let you go, free and sound in both wind and limb, Anson Barbour, if you'd only reveal to me your golden secret. You obstinately refused, but now—confess, or both you and your dainty daughter shall pay the full penalty!"

"Not her—not my poor, innocent child!"

"Bid him defiance, father!" impetuously cried the maiden. "I'd sooner perish in your arms than—"

"Than live in the loving arms of another man?" swiftly interrupted the arch-schemer. "Ah ha, my dainty bird! There are more ways than one of killing a cat! And unless we're to have a wholesale slaughtering in here, there is but the one method of locking lips left; all must be interested in keeping our little secrets from the outside world!"

"As for you, Anson Barbour, a man who could hold out as long as you have against such powerful arguments as I brought to bear, could and would keep his lips sealed until the time limit expired."

"As for this fair maiden, surely she would do naught that could bring harm or shame to the head of her legal lord and master!"

"That simmers it down to the third and last factor, which I'll let wait just a bit longer, with your kindly permission, my beloved friends!"

So far in a tone of grim mockery, but now his voice and manner altered again, words coming swift and fierce from behind that black mask.

"Right there you have it, Anson Barbour! Show me where your gold is cached, or I'll kill you by the worst tortures human mind ever invented! Give this girl your firm commands to marry with the groom I have in waiting for her, or see her suffer a thousand-fold worse fate! Do these two things, or—pay the full penalty!"

Where he had stubbornly withstood all efforts at winning his golden secret when only his own life was menaced, Anson Barbour lost that marvelous nerve now that

harm was threatened his beloved and only child.

"Spare her—do what you like with me, you devil! I'm old—I can stand it—but she is— Let my darling go free—"

"Stop, father!" passionately cried Fanny, one hand closing over those brokenly pleading lips. "Rather death by torture than stoop so low as to plead to such a miserable wretch!"

But for once Anson Barbour struggled against his own child, and lifting his head, turning it past her reach, he huskily added:

"I'll tell you all! I'll show you my gold, only let my child go free! Let me know past doubting that she is free, safe and unharmed, and that minute I'll tell all you've tried so long to find out!"

"She shall go free as soon as I see her legally a wife, Barbour!"

"Whom do you mean? Where is the man you mean to—"

"How will I do, good people?" rung forth a clear, half-mocking voice.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"HANDS UP, OR DIE, YOU DOG!"

The voice was that of Ten-Strike Tom, and as he spoke those words he sprang lightly forward from darkness into light, right arm coming into play the instant he gained the proper distance.

Fairly upon that black-hooded head descended the heavy pistol-butt, driven by muscles nerved for the occasion, and with a smothered groan the Masked Unknown fell in a quivering heap to the earthen floor.

The King-Pin Detective was already training sights on those dimly visible forms back of the two captives, and now, as he swiftly reversed grips on that useful weapon, forefinger slipping into the trigger-guard, he cried out, to Bascom Hooper:

"Hands up, or die, you dog!"

But—

With a sound which, though muffled and far from distinct, could hardly be mistaken for anything else save a curse of savage rage and hatred, Wallace Gilmore flung himself heavily against Gayworthy, unable to deal a blow with hand or weapon because of his bonds, but making his assault so fierce that the balance of this bold intruder was destroyed.

With a startled cry, Ten-Strike Tom staggered, his foot catching against the body of his first victim, causing him to pitch headlong to earth, one of his pistols exploding with the shock!

Bascom Hooper gave a harsh yell of excited joy, jerking forth his gun as he sprang forward, sending a shot in advance of his coming.

"Down him, pard! Don't let— Ah-h-h!"

An answering flash came from nearer the ground level, and up flew those arms, pistol falling from unnerved fingers, a harsh and choking groan escaping the lips of the death-smitten outlaw!

And, almost like a prolongation of that same flash, a second cartridge exploded, the bullet catching Jingles just as that worthy made his first move to back up his more active comrade.

As he shot, Ten Strike Tom rolled over once more, then sprang to his feet as though tossed upward by the powerful spring of a cunning stage-trap, facing the hampered man who had so nearly sent him down to meet his death at those evil hands.

"Steady, or I'll blow you through!" he cried, sternly, as his guns covered that struggling figure—struggling now to burst or to slip arms out of those bonds.

Until then both Anson Barbour and his daughter, Fanny, had remained as though completely spellbound, neither stirring nor crying aloud.

The manacled miner, as a matter of course, had no means of knowing whether this dashing new comer was really friend or foe, while the maiden was too intensely surprised for hasty speech.

But now, as full recognition came, a cry of joyous hope burst from her lips, and her arms fell away from the neck of her parent for the moment.

A hot flush flew into the face of the King-Pin Detective at that sound, but his eyes never turned her way—then. They were glowing vividly, and his lips curled back far

enough to show his gleaming teeth as he spoke again:

"It's you, you tricky devil!"

He leaped forward, hand and foot acting in unison, both sending Wallace Gilmore down across the senseless body of the Masked Chief.

"Who comes next?" recklessly cried the King-Pin Detective, pressing heavily with one foot upon the back of the bound man, pistols ready for use in case of need, his dark eyes flashing boldly around in quest of still other foemen.

"Hyar we come, boss!"

"That's what!"

Vince Purkiss and his human shadow called forth in cheery encouragement as they came through that dark and narrow passage, and with them to back him up, Ten-Strike Tom felt that the battle was as good as won.

"Whar is he? Whar's the cuss as jolted me two eyes black?" harshly cried the Denver tough as he came into view of that tableau. "Show 'im to me, boss! Jest show 'im to me, an' ef I don't—whar is he, then?"

"Steady, mate!" sternly commanded the Detective Sport as he saw the maiden shrink in renewed fright at this sudden outburst. "Time enough for— Hark!"

From the direction of the mountain shack there came sounds as of sudden warfare; sounds of fire-arms, with other fainter and less distinct echoes which might have been human voices lifted in fierce anger.

"Steady, mates!" repeated Ten-Strike Tom, but with a different meaning to the same words, now. "If that means a rush of whelps like these, you want to play break-water until this lady—"

"The heaper in a heap they come the better—eh, Dan?"

"That's what!"

Ten-Strike Tom sprung across to where Jingles crouched in a moaning heap of wounded fright, one hand fiercely clutching shoulder while its mate shoved pistol muzzle fairly between his eyes, sternly asking:

"Where's the rest of the outfit? Who's in here besides you ducks?"

"Nary critter, boss, fer— Don't shoot!"

"Where are the rest, then? Talk white, or off goes your roof!"

"Boss done sent 'em back to the shack—hope may die ef 'tain't jest that-a-way, boss!"

"How many in all? Lie, and I'll kill you like a mad wolf!"

"Three—jest three, now! Hope may die ef—jest three, boss!"

Ten-Strike Tom felt fairly convinced this frightened knave was speaking the truth, and only lingering long enough to tear away his belt of arms, tossing them over to Dan Mixon, he sternly warned:

"Lie quiet, or you'll cut your own throat! Now—boys?"

"Right on deck we be; eh, Dan?"

"That's what!"

"Seems as though the circus was over, up yonder, but there's no telling what comes next until it's fairly in sight. So—take station out yonder with your guns ready; halt anybody you sight coming this way, but don't shoot without first giving warning. Understand?"

"Waal, I reckon! Eh, Dan?"

"That's what!" once more came that vocal echo, and the two pards from Leadville stole away from the limited region of light, ready for whatever might come their way.

Ten-Strike Tom took a glance to assure himself Wallace Gilmore had not won his freedom from those bonds, then for the first time felt himself at liberty to actually greet the maiden in whose behalf he had run such risk, and—as her glad, grateful cry broke forth at his coming, the King-Pin Detective shoved pistols out of sight, putting his hands to far better use—in his own estimation!

Those hands closed upon the maiden's shoulders, drawing her still agitated figure close against his breast, and if that wasn't a warm, lover-like kiss—well, then the faint echoes told a scandalous lie!

None too soon, either!

Had the gallant Sport delayed through indecision or a sudden access of bashfulness, that kiss would never have been taken and given, for only an instant later there came to his ears the sharp challenge:

"Easy, thar, you! Show cause, or durned

ef ye hain't got into a turrible sight o' trouble, now!"

"That's what!"

"Flag o' truce, gents!" rumbled forth a voice the like of which could come from only one pair of lungs in the whole silver country.

"We're hon your side hof the war, gents!" shrilled another voice in ludicrous contrast. "We've cleaned hout the gang, hup yender, hand now want to 'elp the boss down 'ere!"

"The Siamese Twins!" cried Ten-Strike Tom, adding swiftly: "Hold 'em level, lads, but don't shoot!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

JUST AS IT SHOULD BE.

WITH those warning words, Gayworthy let fall an encouraging whisper to reunited father and daughter, then moved off toward the spot where the Leadville pards had taken position, and where he found them easily holding the "Siamese Twins" level.

There was not much to be seen of either form or feature there in that gloom, but Ten-Strike Tom never for an instant doubted the identity of the twain; no other couple in that entire region could boast of such strongly-contrasting voices.

"You know me, fellows," sternly greeted the King-Pin Detective as he drew nigh. "Now—how come ye here?"

"Lookin' fer the reward you offered to pay fer that dug-gun H. K. Jones, be course!" rumbled the fat man.

"If you're trying any more of your dirty tricks, I'll—"

"Cross me 'eart, sir!" squealed the tall fellow, with a touch of indignation in his tones as he added: "Hif you don't believe hus, take ha bit hof a trip hup to the 'ouse, yender! Hif we didn't punch the bloody stuffin' hout hof them bloomink coves, then hI wouldn't say so!"

"Waal, I should re-mark!" chimed in Harry Kane, tersely. "We laid out three of 'em—laid 'em out too cold fer skinnin', boss!"

Ten-Strike Tom hesitated for a brief space, his brain working rapidly, the result making itself known in these words:

"If you're playing white, you'd ought to be willing to prove your words, fellows. Will you go show us those three cripples, then?"

"Why wouldn't we, boss?"

"Hof course we're willink, yer H'onor."

"All right. Mates, follow these gentlemen back to the cabin they say they came from. If they try to give you the slip, or if they lead you into a trap, blow their brains out!"

The King Pin Sport turned back to the earth-chamber where he had left both friends and foes, giving a cheery salutation to the fair maid the dew of whose sweet lips still seemed to linger upon his own, then turning to Wallace Gilmore, who had succeeded in gaining his own footing once more, but whose arms still remained helplessly hampered.

"Steady, Sport! I've got a bone or two to pick with you, later on, but for now—stand steady, and don't take such another stagger just for the purpose of jolting me out of the ring!"

That handkerchief had been rubbed off from over those lips, and now Gilmore muttered something: just what, Gayworthy never heeded, for he was stooping low to roll that dark shape over upon its back, then tearing away the sable mask which had until now hidden that visage.

Ten-Strike Tom had been looking for a surprise, but what he now saw proved even more astonishing than he had anticipated. For, as the mask came off, he recognized the arch-schemer, sharply ejaculating:

"The deacon, by glory!"

And so it was! "Deacon Rankin Ballinger was "Daddy Markle," was "the boss," was the Masked Chief, was—none other than the long-sought H. K. Jones!

There was one hardly less important discovery made by Ten-Strike Tom at nearly the same moment of his unmasking the arch-plotter; that was whither the bullet so hurriedly fired by Bascom Hooper, intending it for yonder tumbling enemy whom Wallace Gilmore had so audaciously upset, had gone.

That shot passed entirely through the body of the man in the mask, and he only recovered his senses to realize that his earthly course was well-nigh run.

When this was made clear to him, the daring trickster confessed all to Gayworthy and his friends; including the Leadville pards, the Siamese Twins, father and daughter, as well as the still bound Wallace Gilmore.

He told how he had been tempted by the display of gold-dust and nuggets made to him as "Daddy Markle," by Anson Barbour who likewise let fall something of his having cached a fortune off yonder in the as yet generally unsuspected gold-fields.

He told how he kept the miner chained in this cunningly masked retreat, torturing him every week, sometimes every day of the week, in the vain attempt to make him confess where his gold was hidden.

At first the criminal refused to speak of Corse Payson, but after Anson Barbour explained how he had contrived to communicate with that wild, reckless, yet fairly honest fellow, giving him a hastily-scribbled note to deliver to the legal authorities, Jones gave way, telling without scruple, but rather as though he enjoyed the reminiscence, how he had hunted the fugitive, finally sending him to his death across the threshold of the Good Luck Saloon.

Dropping his Winchester, tearing off the false beard which he was wont of late days to wear as the mountain hermit, "Daddy Markle," Jones fled to knock down Vincent Purkiss as that stalwart tough barred his way to escape. Then—well, as "Deacon" Rankin Ballinger the assassin returned to join in the vain hunt for—himself!

And then, heedless of the execrations showered upon him, Jones told of the cunning role played by Wallace Gilmore, who he as freely admitted was in reality his own son.

Told how Jake Dobson gave Gilmore the opportunity which he so neatly improved; told how Gilmore helped Hooper decoy the maiden out of town, then pretended to be dead, to be carried off as a corpse, to eventually reappear before the maiden (and heiress) as an heroic protector!

It was all made so clear! The miserable wretch was so thoroughly exposed! And then—well, with Bascom Hooper stone dead, with Jingles a cripple for life, with only one living of the lawless trio caught off their guard at the shack by the Siamese Twins, and with the villain dying who so neatly "jolted" him between the eyes—why wouldn't Vince Purkiss and his pard hugely enjoy booting the exposed trickster clean out of that section?

No reason at all, and that is precisely what they did, too!

Hooper had not felt one of those savage blows dealt by Wallace Gilmore, but the hard earthen floor bore the deep dents, when Ten-Strike Tom looked for them!

The arch-plotter died without seeing the sunlight again, and his body was left there in the earth-chamber, together with that of his henchman, Bascom Hooper.

The friends safely reached Leadville, where Anson Barbour quickly rallied his bodily powers, soon looking like a new man altogether. And, guided by a little map which he drew, Ten-Strike Tom, with the Leadville Pards and the Siamese Twins, found no serious difficulty in recovering the hidden fortune which had cost the long-missing miner so dearly.

Paying off the Twins, and leaving a comfortable *douceur* in the honest if soap-washy palm of Biddy McCarthy, Thomas Gayworthy turned back on the Carbonate Camp, facing for Denver as their next station on the long but happy trip back to Ohio.

And when there?

Well, the King Pin Sport repeated that audacious kiss more than once, and finally won Fanny's consent to giving Anson Barbour a son—by way of the church!

On their wedding tour, the happy couple passed through Denver, stopping long enough for Gayworthy to see Jake Dobson, thanks to whose additional confession he had been able to find Daddy Markle's cabin, as well as that secret adit. And when the bridal couple left, the Denver Tramp had a pocket full of yellow coin!

THE END.

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